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Men loved and fought and died
while Big Muddy kept rollin' along

GOLD MEDAL BOOK

RED RUNS THE RIVER

William Heuman

AN ORIGINAL NOVEL—NOT A REPRINT ©

Battle of Giants

As Barabee fell on top of Kirby, the giant's hands grasped Kirby by the shoulder and the back of the head, forcing his face under the water and into the sand. Kirby could feel Barabee settling himself on top of him. His face was under six inches of water, and he knew Barabee intended to keep it there until he was dead.

Frantically he struggled to free himself, holding his breath so that he would last longer. He succeeded in nearly unseating the giant from his back, but Barabee recovered himself, and now they were out in deeper water. Kirby's breath was gone. His head started to throb violently. The air left his lungs in one long gasp, and the water was coming in. He tried once more, a final desperate effort. Then the blackness closed around him and he was being compressed into a very small space. . . .

Kirby Trent was fighting for more than his life. . . . He was fighting to keep the Big Muddy rolling free.

Other novels by William Heuman

GUNS AT BROKEN BOW

ROLL THE WAGONS

HUNT THE MAN DOWN

RED RUNS THE RIVER

William Heuman

A GOLD MEDAL ORIGINAL

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Chapter One

THE Big Muddy rolled down at them through the breaks in the tawny hills, broad and brown, speckled with trees it had torn from the banks a thousand miles upstream. High up in the glass-enclosed pilothouse of the River Queen, Captain Kirby Trent could feel the drive of the current. The Queen was a fairly big boat for the upper river—one hundred and ninety feet long, a thirty-three-foot beam, four hundred tons, three boilers, and still along this reach opposite Red Palisades the strong Missouri current threatened to spin her around and send her downriver faster than she'd come up.

Steadying the wheel with his big hands, Kirby edged her in a little toward the east bank to miss a sawyer moving straight toward them in center river. He made the crossing at High Rock another mile up the river, hugged the west bank here for two miles, and then took her out to center river again to move between the two small, heavily wooded islands known as the Twin Sisters. That was when he saw the man standing on the narrow stretch of sand beach at the southern tip of the west island.

Down below on the texas deck the first mate, Jonas Flynn, had been chatting with one of the few passengers making this last trip of the season upriver. The red-haired Flynn had been facing north, and he saw the man on the beach at the same time that Kirby saw him.

Kirby watched Flynn turn, look up at the pilothouse, and then point. Nodding his head, Kirby pulled once on his whistle cord to let the stranger know he was seen, and then he sounded his landing bells. Up here, two thousand miles from St. Louis and civilization, and deep in

Indian country, you didn't pass a stranger on the river.

Jonas Flynn was coming up the flight of steps from the texas to the hurricane deck, and then swinging around to the pilothouse door in the rear, a short, squat man with tremendous shoulders and flaming red hair. He said as he came through the door, "Could be Yellowstone Sam, Kirby."

"Could be." Kirby nodded. "We'll have a look."

They were still too far out in the river to recognize the man on the beach, but on several occasions in the past he'd picked up the venerable trapper along this stretch of river, and about this time of the season. Yellowstone Sam McGee was known along the Missouri from Steamboat Bend, last stop on the Big Muddy, all the way down to St. Louis.

"On the other hand," Flynn went on slowly, "could be somethin' else. Could be a captive white man them damned Sioux are havin' stand out there to draw us in to the shore so they can come aboard. Ain't nothin' the Sioux like better than to burn a Missouri River packet."

Kirby shifted the half-smoked cigar in his mouth and stared at the heavily wooded banks behind the sand beach. They were moving in toward the beach at half speed now, and he swung the nose of the boat slightly so that he could head up through the channel at high speed if he had to.

"They raided the General Grant earlier in the spring," Flynn was saying. "Nearly took her, too. Mate Sanders was tellin' me back in St. Louis. The red devils had a big black stallion tied in a meadow off the river. About two hundred of 'em layin' in the brush along the river. Captain O'Neil figured the horse had strayed from an Army post, and he thought he'd pick it up. The Sioux damn near picked up O'Neil's hair."

Kirby said, "That looks like Yellowstone Sam to me."

Flynn poked his head out through the pilothouse win-

dow and called down to the passenger below, "Reckon you better step inside, Mr. Greene. Might be Injuns here."

Kirby glanced down curiously at the passenger on the texas deck. Brandon Greene had sat at his table each day on this long trip up from St. Louis, and yet he knew practically nothing about the man. Greene was fairly young, probably in his late twenties, a tall, rangy man with brown hair and brown eyes, well educated apparently, well dressed, well off financially.

It was rather unusual to be taking passengers upriver at this season of the year, when the other boats were bringing the trade down. The upper Missouri winters were not pleasant, and even the hardened miners in the Montana gold fields high-tailed it for Steamboat Bend and the downriver boats with the intention of wintering in St. Louis and coming north again the following spring.

With the River Queen able to accommodate thirty passengers comfortably in its cabins, they were taking a scant half dozen on this trip north, the second trip Kirby had made this season. On the way back he expected to have between a hundred and fifty and two hundred passengers, mostly miners who would bivouac on the decks.

Brandon Greene looked up and smiled when the mate called to him. He waved a hand to Kirby, flashing a set of even white teeth, and then he stepped back to the corner of the cabins, where he was still only half concealed.

Flynn said, "Nice chap, that Mr. Greene. Tellin' me he was in California last winter. Says it was like midsummer here all durin' the winter."

Kirby was watching that silent figure standing on the beach several hundred yards away from them. He said briefly, "It's Yellowstone Sam, all right. He'll have to get his pants wet, though. I can't take her in closer than thirty yards from the shore. We have too much of a load on here."

Jonas Flynn said dubiously, "Could be them Sioux

captured Sam, an' they got a tether rope around his leg an' a hundred arrows aimed at his back."

Kirby laughed. "Sam would take those arrows in the back," he stated, "rather than draw us in. This isn't a trap, Jonas."

Already Yellowstone Sam McGee was edging out into the water to be picked up, knowing that the heavily loaded River Queen couldn't come in too close. He was dressed in buckskins and he wore a tattered felt hat. His rifle he carried under his arm, and he had a small pack on his back, probably a blanket and a few possessions.

"Funny business," Flynn observed, "Sam waitin' for a ride upriver. Mostly, he's goin' down this time o' year."

They were drifting in slowly now, the big stern wheel revolving at less than half speed, the water cascading from the paddles, sparkling in the bright afternoon sunshine. Out in midstream with the breeze blowing through the pilothouse it had been fairly comfortable even though the day was hot. Close in toward the shore with the head of the island blocking the breeze, the heat was intense.

Kirby mopped at his face with a handkerchief. He looked down at Yellowstone Sam, now almost up to his waist in the water, waiting patiently. One of the crew was standing in the bow with a rope.

Sam McGee, guide and trapper, was a gaunt, bony man, his buckskins blackened with the grease of a thousand campfires. He had a brush of gray-black beard and a hawk nose. Looking up at Kirby in the pilothouse, he lifted a hand in greeting, his brown face expressionless.

When the River Queen moved in close enough the crewman tossed the rope, and Yellowstone Sam clambered aboard, river water streaming from him as he came on deck.

Kirby rang his bell and turned the prow of the stern-wheeler out into deep water again, heading toward the channel between the islands.

Jonas Flynn said, "I'll bring him up an' see what he has to say, Kirby."

Kirby nodded. He heard the door close behind him, and then he felt the cool breeze sweep through the open pilothouse windows as they came into the channel. The current coming through the channel was strong and sharp, and he could feel the throb of the engines beneath him as they bucked the tide.

There was a big rock on the west island, and Kirby scanned it carefully as they went past, noting the water mark. When he had come past this same rock in May the water had been three feet higher, which meant that this trip he could not go through the Devil's Chute, a cut-off up above Timber Point. He'd been deliberating that point all morning. Taking the short cut through the Chute saved them twenty miles, and all boats used it on the early-spring trip when the river was high, swollen with melting snow from the upper mountains. He'd have to avoid the Chute now unless he wanted to stick there until next spring, with the Sioux pecking away at him all winter.

White wood smoke gushed up from the twin stacks, leaving a heavy streamer in the air. Kirby Trent glanced up at the gilt framework extending between the two stacks, and then he whistled softly. He was proud of his boat. On the previous trip north this season he'd broken all records on the trip from St. Louis to Steamboat Bend, twenty-five hundred miles upriver. He'd made the distance in seven weeks; most river packets took a full two months to reach the rowdy river town, jump-off spot for the Montana-bound miners.

Even now, with a hundred and ninety tons of mining machinery and staples in the hold of the boat, he was still going under two months for the upriver trip. Heading downstream, aided by the strong current, he could expect to reach St. Louis in two or three weeks.

He had a good boat, and he wanted to keep it. It had taken him eight long years of piloting on the upper river to earn enough money to buy it, and he'd made his selection carefully from the hundreds of boats tied along the St. Louis wharfs. The River Queen had been a Mississippi River boat, but she had a light draft of only sixteen inches, and the first time Kirby had seen her tied up at the wharf he'd fallen in love with her. She was low, fast, sleek, with not too much ornamentation, none of the elaborate gingerbreadwork that characterized some of the lower river boats, plenty of drive in the big stern wheel, and her boilers were in good shape.

He'd examined every inch of the boat before putting out his money, and when he'd signed the papers he'd known that he had one of the finest packets on the Big Muddy.

If the mysterious combine now operating on the lower river and already attempting to get control of all boats on the Big Muddy thought they could take away his privileges and powers as captain and sole owner, they had another guess coming.

Jonas Flynn was coming up the stairs with Yellowstone Sam, the trapper still shaking water from his buckskins. Kirby had a cigar waiting for him when he stepped into the cabin.

Flynn said grimly, "Reckon Sam here has bad news, Kirby."

Kirby handed the trapper the cigar as he steered the River Queen out through the other end of the channel and into open river again. He said, "Let's hear it, Sam."

"Damned Injuns waitin' up at Elbow Rock fer you, Kirby. Near two hundred of 'em, from what I kin see."

He spoke slowly in a hoarse voice, the voice of a man who had been long in the mountains, and who had spoken to no one during that time.

Kirby Trent relaxed and then tightened his grip on the

wheel spokes. He said without turning his head, his voice expressionless, "You think they plan to attack, Sam?"

"They ain't been sittin' up there on their behinds fer two weeks fer nothin'," Sam McGee observed. He bit off the tip of the cigar and spat in the general direction of the cuspidor. "Reckon they know there's allus a last boat comin' upriver every season, Kirby, an' this year it's yore new one." He looked around the pilothouse and he added, "Ain't a bad one, neither. You waited a long time fer this, Kirby."

"We don't figure on havin' the Sioux burn it for us, either," Jonas Flynn growled. "Shall I strike out the guns?"

"No rush," Kirby told him.

Elbow Rock was another three or four hours upstream, and they couldn't expect to reach it till nearly five o'clock in the afternoon. He knew the spot well. They had to swing in toward the west bank at Elbow Rock because the large Hat Island blocked the river. The west channel was less than thirty yards in width, plenty deep enough to get through, but the heavy foliage on either side of the channel made it an ideal spot for an Indian ambuscade. Added to this was the fact that they had to swing around the huge gray Elbow Rock in order to enter the channel, which meant that they had to proceed at half speed through the opening. The Sioux had picked their spot well.

Yellowstone Sam said, "How many men you got aboard, Kirby?"

"Thirty-two," Kirby said, "counting the passengers."

"Don't never count no damn passengers," Sam McGee scowled, looking down contemptuously on the well-dressed Brandon Greene, lounging on the texas deck, a cigar in his mouth. "When the lead starts flyin' they'll be hidin' under their bunks in the cabins."

Kirby didn't say anything for a few moments, and then he spoke calmly to Flynn. He said, "Shift that starboard

woodpile to the portside, Mr. Flynn. Arrange your fortifications on the portside—only on the portside."

Jonas Flynn stared at him. "Reckon they'll be on both sides o' the channel, Kirby."

Kirby nodded. "I intend to take the River Queen up along the west side of the channel," he stated, "close in toward the shore. We can have all of our men on the portside, firing steadily as we go past. They'll never be able to come aboard. The starboard side of the boat will be too far from the opposite bank to enable them to swim out and come aboard."

Yellowstone Sam was nodding his head emphatically. "Give 'em hell," he chuckled. "Give 'em hell, Kirby."

Jonas Flynn thought about it for a moment. "All that fire power on the portside should keep 'em off," he agreed, "but there ain't too much water in that channel this time o' year, Kirby. If we get stuck—"

"We're not getting stuck," Kirby said.

Flynn scratched his jaw. "Your boat, Kirby," he murmured.

Kirby said to the trapper, "Had your dinner, Sam?"

"Cold jerked beef," Sam McGee scowled. "Damned Injuns are thicker'n fleas along this part o' the river. Didn't want to build no fire."

"Have the cook rustle up something for you," Kirby told him. "We're obliged to you for warning us, Sam."

"Hell." McGee grinned. "Reckon I got to have a boat to take me downriver this fall. Damned bones gettin' too old to stand these mountain winters."

He stamped out of the cabin, and Jonas Flynn stood beside Kirby, staring out through the pilothouse window, before going below to arrange for the defense of the boat.

Flynn said soberly, "Hate like hell to see you lose this boat, Kirby, to Injuns or to anyone else."

Kirby knew what Jonas Flynn was referring to: the combine. "I don't figure on losing it," he told him.

Chapter Two

An hour before the River Queen was to pass Elbow Rock and Hat Island, Kirby pulled the packet in at Tomahawk Bluff for a consultation with the crew and passengers.

As the River Queen pushed upstream during the afternoon, Jonas Flynn had broken open the munitions chests, supplying each crewman with a rifle and short arm. He'd had the starboard woodpile shifted to the portside, piled up high enough so that a man could stand comfortably behind it and fire over the top.

The crew was gathered on the main deck when Kirby came down from the pilothouse, a cigar in his mouth. He saw the passengers in a group over near the staircase. Five of them were already badly frightened, as Yellowstone Sam anticipated they would be. There were two drummers in this group, a mine engineer, and a few tradesmen.

The sixth man was Brandon Greene, who seemingly had no business, and who smiled pleasantly at Kirby when he came down the steps. Kirby was thinking that Sam McGee had not been entirely correct. There was no fear in Greene's soft brown eyes. He was examining an Army Colt gun he had in his hand, spinning the cylinder idly, and from the way he handled the weapon Kirby was quite sure he knew how to use it.

Greene said, "A little unpleasantness ahead, Captain."

Kirby shrugged. "Hazards of the upper river," he said. "I think we'll get through."

"They ever capture a boat before?" Greene queried.

"One last summer," Kirby told him. "Two the summer before."

"At that rate," Brandon Greene chuckled, "they won't get any this summer." To the other passengers he said cheerily, "I'll give odds of three to one that Captain Trent takes this boat past Hat Island."

The two drummers stared at him. One of them was green with fear, his hands shaking. He mumbled, "Who pays off if we don't get through?"

Brandon Greene laughed merrily. "There are no takers, Captain," he chuckled.

Kirby looked at the cigar he held in his hand. He said, "You a gambling man, Mr. Greene?"

The tall passenger shrugged. "You might call me that, Captain," he said. "Thought I'd like to see what Steamboat Bend looks like. There's much talk about it back in St. Louis."

"A rough town," Kirby observed. "We'll tie up there for a week before heading downriver. You figure on booking passage back, Mr. Greene?"

"I don't make my plans so far ahead," Brandon Greene murmured.

Mentally, Kirby labeled the man as a possible Mississippi River boat gambler coming north on this trip with the intention of returning on the downriver boat, which would be jammed with miners. These Montana miners would have their pockets lined with gold dust, and most of them would be pretty anxious to buck the tiger on the monotonous trip down at St. Louis.

As a steamboat captain, Kirby Trent had no objection to a professional gambler plying his trade on his packet as long as the professional's game was clean. If it wasn't, he'd find himself stranded at some tiny hamlet downriver.

Addressing the crew, Kirby told his plan of battle very simply. The Sioux were expecting this to be a surprise attack. When they were greeted with a hail of lead from the portside of the boat, close in along the bank, it might prove discouraging.

"I feel sure," Kirby told them, "that we'll get through. Don't open fire until we're abreast of the spot where they're hidden, and then give it to them good. It'll be close range and you'll have fairly good protection behind the woodpiles. Keep firing until we're past. If any of them get aboard, use your pistols on them."

He looked around, and he added, "Any questions?"

Brandon Greene said, "Any particular disposition of the passengers, Captain?"

"Pick your spot and fire with the rest."

"Thank you, sir," Greene said.

When he went back up to the pilothouse, Yellowstone Sam McGee accompanied Kirby, Jonas Flynn staying below with the crew. In the pilothouse Kirby spoke through the tube to the engine room:

"I'll want full speed when we get around Elbow Rock. Keep your fire up, Fred."

Fred Johnson, the engineer, mumbled, "Yes, sir."

Sam McGee looked around the pilothouse, and then he said, "You got sheathin' iron around this whisky barrel, Captain?"

Kirby nodded, smiling at the quaint way McGee had described the pilothouse. Every upper river boat had its pilothouse sheathed with boiler iron as protection against bullets from the shore. He'd had that done on the River Queen shortly after purchasing the boat.

"Figured I'd stay up here," McGee observed, "an' pot a few of 'em while you're steerin' the boat, Kirby."

He lowered one of the portside windows and leaned out, spitting down on the roof of the cabin below. Kirby rang his bells and pulled away from the landing place. He could hear Yellowstone Sam whistling softly as the River Queen hugged the west bank, following a stretch of fairly straight water.

Up above Rattlesnake Chute, a twisting channel through a maze of small islands, they came out again on

clear water, and then they saw Hat Island looming up ahead, with the big boulder of Elbow Rock jutting out into the river on the west bank.

"Here she comes," Sam McGee said cheerily. He picked up his Sharps rifle, which he'd stood against the wall, and he placed his cartridges on the bench in front of him.

Down below on the texas deck Kirby saw Brandon Greene strolling unconcernedly. He watched the man as he piled together a few deck chairs near the front railing, making himself a little barricade from which he could shoot down on the Indians. He was alone on deck.

Jonas Flynn came out on the main deck up near the twin capstans and in between the grasshopper spars. He turned and looked up at Kirby, waving a hand to let him know that they were ready on the main deck.

Kirby leaned out the window a little and called down to Brandon Greene on the texas. He said, "Not too safe up here, Mr. Greene."

The passenger smiled. "Heard the Sioux were pretty poor shots, Captain," he said.

Kirby shook his head. "Keep your head down when we get in close, Mr. Greene," he warned.

Greene looked up at him as he sat down on one of the chairs and leaned back. He said, "You're kind of a setting duck up there, yourself, Captain."

"My boat," Kirby told him.

Yellowstone Sam said, "There's a cool one, Kirby."

Kirby rang his bells for half speed as they approached the island and the channel. The woods were thick on Hat Island, and equally as thick on the mainland, even though he couldn't see it around the gigantic Elbow Rock.

The rock jutted about forty feet into the air, bulging out into the river. It was gray in color, its base ringed with watermarks. From the location of the present watermark Kirby could tell exactly how much water he had in the Hat Island channel.

In the center of the channel he could go through without any fear whatsoever, but near the west bank there were several small sand bars he'd have to keep in mind every moment after they got around the rock. He had to bear in mind, too, that his boat was heavily loaded and would take considerably more than a sixteen-inch draft.

Yellowstone Sam said imperturbably, "Reckon they're watchin' us now, Kirby. I owe 'em somethin' for rubbin' out French Joe Cartier. Him an' me was partners two winters back."

"Didn't know they killed French Joe," Kirby said. He was watching the oncoming island closely now.

"Ain't the killin' I minded so much," Sam growled. "It's the way they done it. Them Sioux ain't nice people, Kirby. Skinnin' a man when he's still alive ain't bein' polite. French Joe never done 'em much harm exceptin' maybe shootin' thirty or forty of 'em."

Kirby called down to Brandon Greene, "Coming in. Better stay down now."

Greene nodded, tossed his cigar overboard into the water, and then slipped off the chair to the floor of the deck. Kirby saw him slip the Colt gun out of his waistband.

They were about two hundred yards out from the island, and he could see where the channel opened up now on the other side of Elbow Rock. Nothing moved on the bank. They were going in at half-speed, and then Kirby rang the bell for even less speed because it was a tricky turn into the channel.

He couldn't see Jonas Flynn and the crew lined up along the portside of the boat, but they were there, hidden behind the woodpiles, waiting.

Sam McGee said, "Keep your head down, Kirby, when they start shootin'. Lot of 'em will be aimin' at you."

Kirby nodded. Despite the fact that he was occupying the highest point in the boat, and therefore an ideal target for sharpshooters on the shore, he possessed this one

advantage: The left bank of the river was low, which meant that the Sioux would have to shoot up at him. With the pilothouse sheathed in boiler iron three quarters of the way up from the floor, he would make a poor target if he crouched slightly as he stood behind the wheel.

At the same time he was aware of the fact that most of the early Sioux bullets would be sent in his direction. The Indians were smart enough to know that if they shot him down, the river boat might ram into the bank and stall. It would only be a matter of time, then, before they boarded.

The big paddle wheel was scarcely moving as they drifted in toward the mouth of the channel. They were almost abreast of Elbow Rock now, and less than a hundred yards from the south shore of Hat Island. He could feel the tug of the current as it swept out through the channel, and then he rang for half speed again to take them around the rock.

Yellowstone Sam had lowered all the windows so that they wouldn't be struck by pieces of flying glass when the bullets came. He stood at the portside window, his rifle held in readiness.

The stern wheel dug into the brown water, took them around the rock, and into the channel. Kirby Trent took a deep breath, rang his bells for full speed, and then crouched a little behind the wheel as he sent the River Queen over toward the west bank, perilously close to it.

He knew this channel, and he knew this river. He knew the upper Missouri the way a man knows the inside of his parlor. He knew every mile of it. He knew it at night when the landmarks were only blurs. He knew it and he loved it.

They still hadn't seen any Indians. The channel was about a half mile long, and before they'd gone a hundred yards the River Queen was moving at top speed. Kirby

shuddered to think what would happen if a sawyer tore into them below the surface. A half-submerged tree was coming down the channel, but it was not a large one, and it drifted slowly along the island bank, a recent casualty to the force of the Big Muddy, leaves still green.

Yellowstone Sam said softly, "I see one of 'em, Kirby. They're here, all right."

Kirby didn't look. He kept his eyes on the channel, on the shoreline along the west bank. Directly ahead was one of the two small sand bars they had to cross. There was the possibility they might scrape on one of them, but the drive on the paddle wheel should be enough to send them on and over.

Then the rifles started to crack, followed immediately by the high-pitched Sioux whoops. Puffs of white smoke came from the trees along either bank. Bullets whined through the open windows of the pilothouse, tearing up through the roof.

Kirby felt one of them graze the back of his neck, and then he heard Yellowstone Sam's heavy-gauge gun roar. There was a scream a fraction of a second later, and Sam growled. "That one was up in a high tree, Kirby, shootin' in here."

Kirby knew, then, why Yellowstone Sam had come up into the pilothouse. The trapper had expected that.

Down below on the main deck the guns of the crew were banging regularly, firing straight into the trees on the portside, a heavy fire at a range of less than thirty yards.

On the opposite bank Kirby saw the Sioux running down to the shoreline, lithe, brown, half-naked figures, brandishing rifles, firing as they came out into the water, disappointed that the river boat was so far over toward the opposite bank.

None of them plunged into the water with the intention of swimming out to the boat because the River

Queen was moving fast. Bullets continued to whine through the pilothouse, and occasionally Yellowstone Sam would poke his gun through and fire, dropping down again to reload.

Kirby felt the River Queen touch the first sand bar and slow down for a fraction of a second, and for that moment his heart stopped beating. Then the huge paddle wheel tore into the water and they were moving again into deeper water.

Down below he could hear Jonas Flynn's deep roar of triumph, and he knew that all was going well.

Sam McGee yelled, "We got 'em, Kirby!"

The tree that had been drifting down along the island bank was almost abreast of them now, and it would pass so close that the branches would scrape the bow. Aside from losing a little paint it would do no harm.

Kirby was concentrating upon the second sand bar in the channel when the tree made contact with the bow of the boat. Then he saw something hidden inside those leafy branches that made him forget about the sand bar. A painted face suddenly loomed up from the green leaves, brown hands reached for the railing, and a slim brown body slithered over onto the deck like a lizard.

Another, and then a third Sioux clambered out from the branches of the tree, and Kirby yelled, "Sam! Down there!"

He couldn't do anything about it himself, having to keep both hands on the pilot wheel in this tricky channel. As he watched, six Indians scrambled from the drifting tree to the deck, three of them racing up the steps toward the texas deck with the intention of reaching the pilothouse and cutting him down.

Sam McGee was at a disadvantage, having just fired his Sharps rifle. Kirby heard him let out an oath as he hastily crammed a cartridge into the gun.

At this point Brandon Greene came into the fight.

Kirby, crouching in the pilothouse, had been unable to see the tall passenger below on the texas deck. He saw him now as the three Sioux tore up the steps.

Greene, gun in hand, stepped out to the head of the stairs, lifted his Colt gun, and fired three times. The three Indians collapsed on the stairs. One of them nearly reached the top step. He had a knife in his hand, and he lunged at Brandon Greene with the knife, missing his leg by a matter of inches.

Kirby watched Greene line his gun coolly on the remaining Indians below on the main deck. He dropped another one, and then Sam McGee's gun roared, smashing the fifth man against the capstan, where he lay, blood gushing from the hole in his chest.

The remaining buck took a long leap over the railing into the water just as the drifting tree swung clear of the River Queen. As he came up out of the muddy water, Yellowstone Sam's Sharps rifle banged again, and the Sioux sank beneath the surface.

They were past the ambush now, and Jonas Flynn's men were shouting triumphantly down on the main deck. Kirby Trent felt the River Queen graze the second sand bar and then slide over into deeper water. He kept the bow of the river packet steady on the course, and in another minute they were passing the head of Hat Island, moving out into the wide Missouri and safety.

Kirby took a deep breath. He looked down on the texas deck and saw Brandon Greene turning one of the dead Indians over on his face, looking down at him curiously as he clicked the empty shells out of his Colt gun.

Yellowstone Sam had come over to stand beside Kirby. He, too, was looking down at the tall passenger on the deck below. The trapper said softly, "Looks like a damn dude; dresses like one, an' talks like one, but he ain't, Kirby. No, sir, he ain't."

Kirby Trent didn't think so, either.

Chapter Three

JONAS FLYNN reported that he had two men wounded, neither of them seriously, and none killed. He came up to the pilothouse, stopping for a few moments to talk with Brandon Greene on the texas. When he entered the pilothouse he said happily, "We didn't do too bad, Kirby. I figure we potted about thirty of 'em. They won't be hittin' at river boats too soon again."

"Next spring," Kirby observed, "we'll put a swivel gun up in the bow."

Flynn looked down at Brandon Greene, who was watching the crew roll the bodies of the dead Sioux into the water. He said thoughtfully, "Reckon with that chap down there today you didn't need a swivel gun, did you, Kirby? Yellowstone Sam tells me he pegged three of 'em with three shots."

Kirby nodded thoughtfully. "If they'd got up here to the pilothouse," he stated, "I think we'd have lost our boat, Jonas."

"Not to mention our hair," Flynn observed. "What do you make of him, Kirby?"

Kirby shrugged. "Reckon you find all kinds on the river," he said. "This is a new breed."

Brandon Greene was a new breed—poised, educated, cultured, and very deadly.

They tied up that night twenty miles above Hat Island on the east bank of the river. As the crew was making the boat fast against the bank, Kirby lit himself a cigar and came down out of the pilothouse. The cook already had supper on the table, and the passengers were waiting.

The two drummers, who had taken no part in the fight, were boasting of their exploits. They'd been firing from the cabin windows, and according to their tales, each had bagged at least a dozen Sioux apiece.

Brandon Greene sat at his accustomed place at the opposite end of the table, smiling, listening to the talk.

Kirby paused at his chair before taking his own seat. He said, "As owner and captain of the River Queen, Mr. Greene, I feel that I owe you a debt of gratitude for your part in the affair this afternoon."

Brandon Greene smiled up at him, a kind of humor lurking deep down in his brown eyes. He said, "I assure you, Captain, I had my own interests at heart when those Indians came up the stairway. In taking your boat, they would have undoubtedly taken my hair also."

"Nevertheless," Kirby told him, "it was fortunate you were stationed up on the texas. I would hate to have lost my boat."

"I would hate to see you lose your boat," Brandon Greene murmured, and again that humor came into his eyes.

Kirby Trent had the queer feeling that the tall, brown-haired passenger was seeing something in this situation that he did not see or comprehend. It was vaguely annoying.

After supper he made his usual rounds of the boat, stopping in the boiler room to chat for a few minutes with Fred Johnson, the engineer. Johnson was banking his fire for the night. He looked up at Kirby when the captain came in and said, "She's a good river boat, Mr. Trent."

Johnson was a lean, angular man with thin blond hair and a red face.

"Everything all right down in the boiler room, Fred?" Kirby asked him.

"Like to work a little on that number two piston,"

Johnson said, "but it can wait till we reach Steamboat Bend."

"We should be there by noon tomorrow," Kirby told him. "You'll have a full week to go over the engine."

"Should be enough."

In the boat clerk's office, Kirby sat with Tom Shannon, the clerk, listening to the man talk. He'd shipped with these men on other boats—Flynn, Johnson, Shannon—and he knew them. They knew him, and they'd signed up with him as soon as he purchased his own packet boat.

Shannon, short, bespectacled, a green eyeshade stuck to his head as he sat at his desk, said with a satisfied air, "As far as I can see, Kirby, we're the last boat going up the river this season, which means that we'll be the last starting down."

Kirby nodded. He'd taken that long chance, confident that he could pilot the River Queen up to Steamboat Bend and back in low water without running it high and dry on a sand bank. Other, less experienced upper river pilots were afraid to risk the run in late August. The Big Muddy was strewn with the skeletons of packet boats that had been stranded in late summer, and then cracked up in the ice of winter, or burned by bands of raiding Indians.

The profits, though, in making this last upriver trip were enormous. The last boat down from Steamboat Bend in late summer or early fall carried the biggest passenger list. Miners and townspeople clamored for passage, willing to pay the $150 passenger rate and more in order to quit this desolate, bitter-cold north country.

"I figure," Shannon was saying, "we might take as many as two hundred passengers aboard on the trip south. At a hundred and fifty dollars a head, that runs into considerable money, Kirby."

"How much should we clear?" Kirby asked him, "along with the cargo we're hauling north on this trip?"

"Roughly," Shannon said, "thirty thousand dollars." He added significantly, "If all goes well."

Kirby leaned back in the chair. "What does that mean?" he asked.

"Two hundred passengers," Tom Shannon stated, "most of them just in from the gold fields, and loaded. There might be as much as a million dollars in gold dust on this packet when she pulls away from Steamboat Bend. The captain of the Eclipse last summer, last boat down the river, claimed he had a million and a quarter in the ship's safe, and he sweated all the way down."

Kirby nodded thoughtfully. "We haven't had any trouble on the upper river with river pirates yet."

"Always a first time," Shannon observed, "with money like that aboard. I'd be careful."

"Aim to," Kirby assured him. He went out on the deck and he stood on the texas for a few minutes, enjoying the cool night breeze. He could see the opposite bank far across the river, a smudge of black where the river and the sky met. Stars were beginning to sparkle in the sky, and a half-moon slid up above the treetops on the east bank. The smell of the river came to him, strong and dank, loaded with the silt of a hundred tributaries.

This was the Big Muddy, his river, the lifeline to this northwest territory, an empty land as yet, but he had visions of its flourishing, settlers pouring in someday to plow its fertile fields, and he with his string of packet boats running the machinery and the staples north, bringing the rich grain south.

It had to be a free river, though. You could not prescribe rules and regulations for its free and independent boat owners, as the combine was trying to do, any more than you could prescribe rules for the river itself.

The combine had become very powerful. No one knew as yet just how strong it was, but it was rumored that the combine controlled 75 per cent of the boats on the

Mississippi, and this summer it had been working on the upper Missouri traffic.

The combine was attempting to regulate trade on the rivers. It stipulated the rates river captains could charge for cargo and passengers, and already those rates had leaped enormously, the combine taking a percentage of the profit from each trip.

In addition, the combine gave the various shipowners orders as to where their boats would go, regulating the number of trips, making it difficult for shippers to find accommodations for their cargoes, thus enabling the combine to jack up the rates again.

Already they were supposed to be reaping enormous profits at the expense of the helpless miners far up the river in the Montana gold fields. Prices had soared tremendously because of the increased shipping rates. The little settlements along the lower Missouri, kept alive by the link that the river boats gave them with civilization, were being pinched and squeezed. Settlers were giving up and going downriver.

The big profit, though, was far upriver, where the miners fresh from the gold fields had money to spend. For this reason the combine had been seeking since the previous winter to gain control of the upper river boats.

In a Yankton saloon a combine representative had approached Kirby, threatened, and then had himself thrown through a plate glass window. That had been Kirby's only direct contact with the combine, but he did not expect that they would give up that easily.

Jonas Flynn came up the stairway, paused, and said, "A nice night, Captain."

Kirby Trent nodded, and then a cloud slid across the face of the bright moon, making it dark for the moment. Kirby frowned. The light left the river and it became dark, and he was thinking that that cloud was the combine, an evil shadow falling over the silvery water.

Behind him, Brandon Greene said casually, "Clouding up to rain, Captain?"

"Just a passing cloud," Kirby murmured. "I think we'll have clear weather."

At high noon the next day they swung around the promontory known as Steamboat Bend and came in sight of the town. It was nestled among the barren hills along the edge of the west bank of the river, extending up toward the old abandoned Army post on the slopes.

The straggling streets seemed to run every which way. A thousand rusted smokestacks jutted up from the huts, hovels, and frame buildings along the streets. There was a number of warehouses along the edge of the river, and mooring space for at least a half-dozen river packets. There was one berth along the docks that every river pilot tried to get when moving in to Steamboat Bend. A new wharf had been built the previous year opposite the big Sammis and Smith warehouse. A planked walk ran down from the main street to this wharf, making the loading and unloading considerably easier on the crew.

Kirby had assumed quite naturally that the berth would be empty with all packets headed south. Three days before they'd passed the eight-boiler Winfield Scott, which they'd assumed was the only boat on the upper river. To his surprise now, Kirby spotted another river boat, a side-wheeeler, churning around a bend north of the town, and swinging in toward the landing.

Jonas Flynn, in the pilothouse with Kirby, said slowly, "Where in hell did that come from, Kirby?"

Kirby shook his head. "Must have been up to Laneville with a small cargo. Returning now."

Laneville was a little hamlet a dozen miles north of Steamboat Bend. Very few of the larger boats would risk the trip there, however, because of the many sand bars and shoals.

"Must have a pretty light draft," Flynn muttered. "She ain't too much of a river boat, Kirby."

The strange boat was a small, rather rakish affair, with one stack and in need of paint. White wood smoke gushed from the stack, and as they watched they heard the hoarse bellow of its whistle.

Kirby tugged on his whistle cord twice in answer, but there was a frown on his face as he did so. A second boat at Steamboat Bend meant competition. This saucy little packet swinging in toward the landing would take away quite a few of his passengers, and some of the profit they'd figured on making this trip.

While he did not begrudge a fellow captain a share in the profits, he had not considered that there would be competition this time of the year. He'd borrowed a considerable amount of money from the bankers in St. Louis to enable him to buy the River Queen, his own savings not having been sufficient, and he'd intended to pay back the loan on the profits from this trip. Having those profits cut now was not a pleasant prospect.

Jonas Flynn said suddenly, "She's headin' for that Sammis an' Smith landin', Kirby. You ain't lettin' her do that!"

Kirby smiled a little. Like every river man, he enjoyed a little race, and this saucy side-wheeler seemed intent on beating him to the choice landing place.

They were about an equal distance from the wharf, still approximately a mile from the town, but Kirby had little doubt that even against the current he could beat this side-wheeler to the prize.

Through the speaking tube he called for more steam from Fred Johnson in the boiler room. The big paddle wheel in the stern of the River Queen started to revolve at a faster clip. They were still out in center river, but Kirby started to swing in toward the shore now, still watching the strange packet.

As they drew closer he could see the pilot up in the pilot house, and then after a while he could read the name in tarnished gilt letters across the face of the pilothouse.

"City of St. Louis," Jonas Flynn murmured. "Must be one o' them damned downriver boats come up here to horn in on our traffic, Kirby."

Kirby nodded. He knew most of the boats, captains, and pilots on the upper Missouri, but occasionally strange boats made the long trip up to Steamboat Bend, hiring a Missouri River pilot to guide them. This boat he did not know, and Flynn was probably correct in assuming it was a downriver, or Mississippi River, boat.

Flynn said tersely, "Reckon she's gonna race us, too, Kirby. The nerve of her!"

Kirby didn't like the way the little packet was heading in toward the berth. She was moving pretty fast, pushed by the downriver current, and as she swung around to head in toward the berth, there was the possibility the current would drive her stern in toward the River Queen.

Kirby Trent did not like to think of that possibility. If his boat were stove in at any point, it would take many weeks to make the repairs, and by that time the river would be unnavigable.

"Better watch her," Flynn growled.

Kirby yanked on his bell cord three times in warning. He kept the nose of the River Queen pointed in toward the prize landing spot, but the little stern-wheeler would not give ground. She came on and on, a distance of less than three hundred yards separating them, and then two hundred.

"Damn it," Flynn muttered, "she'll ram us!"

Passengers and crew of the River Queen were gathered up in the bow of the boat watching the race, and they looked up at Kirby uneasily. In Steamboat Bend itself people were running down the crooked streets toward

the landing place, and there was a big crowd already at the wharf, watching the race, probably betting on it, too.

"When we get ashore," Flynn growled, "I'm goin' over to punch that pilot's head in."

"To do that," Kirby said thinly, "you'll have to run faster than I, Jonas."

He could feel his blood beginning to boil as he watched the pilot of the City of St. Louis swing around sharply, her stern drifting down toward the River Queen before the side wheel could straighten her out and head in toward the berth.

Frantically Kirby yanked on his whistle cord, and then he spun the teller wheel, moving the River Queen away from the berth, giving ground to this smaller boat. The stern of the City of St. Louis missed the River Queen's bow by fifteen feet, much too close for comfort.

Kirby heard the shout from the shore as the little side-wheeler headed in toward the berth, sounding its landing bells. Red-faced, cold sweat on his forehead, Kirby turned the River Queen in toward a smaller berth a hundred feet down from the Sammis and Smith landing.

He hadn't said a word since the City of St. Louis cut him off, and Jonas Flynn, looking at his face, didn't say anything either. They headed in toward the berth, and Kirby waited until the ropes had been tossed ashore and the boat was securely tied.

Slamming his dead cigar at the cuspidor then, he left the pilothouse and went down the steps. The deck hands were throwing the plank from the boat to the landing, and Kirby scarcely waited till it had touched the dock.

He strode ashore, pushing his way through the crowd of grinning, curious townspeople. He pulled his sea cap tighter on his head as he swung along past the line of wharfs, a big man, shoulders set tightly, gray eyes hard.

The City of St. Louis had thrown a plank across from the main deck, and several passengers were preparing to

step off when Kirby came along the plank, elbowing his way past them.

A fat-faced deck hand in a yellow pea jacket came up, bellowing, "Let them passengers off first, mister."

Kirby put a hand against his chest as he went by and shoved hard, and the crewman sat down on the deck, mouth open. Kirby went up the main deck stairs two at a time, swung around the texas, and then started up the ladder to the pilothouse, this small boat having no hurricane deck.

The pilothouse door started to open as he stepped up to it, and he drew back his right fist, ready to swing when the pilot came out. He didn't swing, though. When the door opened a girl with hair the color of wheat came out. She nearly walked into Kirby as she came out of the pilothouse in some haste. She was wearing a faded blue skirt and a gray flannel blouse. Her eyes were blue, a deeper shade than the skirt, and she had a powdering of freckles on her nose.

Dressed properly, she would not have been a bad-looking girl, but Kirby Trent wasn't thinking of that now. He said grimly, "Where is the pilot of this boat, ma'am?"

"Down below," the girl said, "sleeping."

Kirby stared past her through the open door. The pilot room was empty. He said slowly, "Who brought this boat into the mooring just now?"

"I did," the girl told him. She added testily, seeing the expression on Kirby's face, "and I have a pilot's license, too."

Kirby Trent stared at her. "You cut me off," he choked. "You damn near rammed my boat, lady."

He saw the corners of her mouth tighten, and the grimmer she looked, the prettier she became. She said tersely, "So you're the pilot of the River Queen. You had your nerve trying to beat me to that berth. We were a half mile closer to it than you."

"The distance was the same," Kirby snorted, "and besides, on the Missouri an upriver boat is always given the preference coming in to mooring."

"I'm a Mississippi River pilot," the girl snapped. "Besides, I whistled to you that I was going in."

"I whistled, also," Kirby grated. "If you had rammed me I'd see to it that you lost your license. Now, where is the captain of this boat?"

"I'm the captain," the girl told him, her blue eyes blazing, two red spots in her cheeks. "I'm also the owner. What else do you wish to say before I have you put off my boat?"

"That's all," Kirby said grimly, "except that it's a bad day for the Missouri when women take to piloting boats. The next time I see you out on the river, I'm giving you a half-mile clearance at all times."

"See that you do," the girl pilot snapped, "if that's the way Missouri River pilots handle their boats."

Kirby spun around and started down the stairs. When he reached the main deck he saw Brandon Greene just coming across the plank. He stepped to one side, looking at the tall passenger curiously, wondering what business he had on board this little packet.

Greene was looking up toward the pilothouse, a smile on his face, and then Kirby heard the girl pilot's delighted scream, "Brandon! Brandon!"

Greene ran past Kirby on the deck and raced up the stairs to the texas. Glancing up as he went across the planks to the wharf, Kirby saw them in each other's arms. He jammed his hat down on his head and he walked grimly back to his boat. He was thinking that it was a strange thing, though, this meeting between Brandon Greene and the girl owner, captain, and part pilot of the City of St. Louis.

Chapter Four

JONAS FLYNN had the story for him that night as they sat down to eat in the main cabin. Flynn had been ashore while Kirby spent the afternoon looking over the slightly damaged piston Fred Johnson had mentioned.

"She's Greene's sister," Flynn explained. "Goes by the name of Miss Judy Greene, an' it seems they haven't seen each other for several years. Reckon he knew she was somewhere upriver, and he figured he might meet her in Steamboat Bend."

"What about the boat?" Kirby scowled, still thinking of the unpleasant encounter with the girl.

"She owns the boat," Flynn assured him. "Seems her father was a Mississippi River boatman. Died down in New Orleans less than a year ago, and Miss Judy inherited the boat."

Kirby looked at him over the rim of his coffee cup. He said when he put the cup down, "Funny business. You'd think the brother would get the boat."

"This Brandon," Flynn said, "must be somethin' of a drifter. College man from the East, I understand. Been out to California, so he tells us, and been a lot of other places."

"Places where he learned how to use a six-gun," Kirby observed thoughtfully. "This girl taking passengers downriver?"

Jonas Flynn grinned. "Already has her table set up in Sharp Granville's Natchez House, booking passengers. Better get busy, Kirby."

"Anybody rides on that tub in preference to the River Queen," Kirby scowled, "is welcome to it."

Tom Shannon, the clerk, on the other side of the supper table, said, "We'll start booking passage tonight. That all right, Kirby?"

Kirby nodded. He toyed with his coffee cup for a moment, and then he said, "Who's her pilot? She didn't bring that boat up from St. Louis."

"George Stainright," Flynn told him. "A good man."

Kirby inclined his head slightly. Stainright was pretty well known on the upper river, a capable pilot. He wondered why Stainright had consented to pilot the City of St. Louis when there were plenty of other good boats he could have had. Then he remembered that Stainright was a single man, and of marrying age. There weren't too many women on the upper river, and possibly George Stainright had more than one motive in piloting for Miss Judy Greene.

"She was at the wheel this noon," Flynn said, "because George had taken the City of St. Louis up to Laneville. He'd been sixteen hours on duty, and he needed sleep."

"He should have stayed on duty a while longer," Kirby growled. "That girl nearly lost the boat on him."

"Not a bad-lookin' gal, though," Flynn chuckled. "You notice that, Kirby?"

"I didn't notice it," Kirby said flatly. He went on deck, smoking his evening cigar, and he found Yellowstone Sam McGee sitting on the texas, smoking a pipe, staring toward the lights of town.

"She's still roarin'," the trapper grunted. "Wide open, an' the safety valve tied down." He nodded toward the town.

Kirby could hear the noise. This was Steamboat Bend, wickedest town in the Northwest, a tough river port and a jump-off spot for the gold miners at the same time. Up here, twenty-five hundred miles from St. Louis via the twisting river route, a queer admixture of the frontier had gathered. There were ex-Union Army men mingling

with former Confederate soldiers, each still retaining their animosity for each other. There were miners from California, drawn to this new gold field area by the lush rumors that had reached the coast; there were the usual dregs of the river, St. Louis and New Orleans roustabouts, card sharps, occasional settlers coming up to look at the vast virgin territory where the buffalo still roamed.

Steamboat Bend had its man for breakfast every morning, and it was not averse to having another for lunch or dinner that same day. Even as Kirby stood with Yellowstone Sam, watching the blinking lights, he heard a gun bang and then another. A woman screamed.

"There's one," Sam McGee stated, "ain't goin' down the river, Kirby."

Kirby Trent knew that there were plenty who wouldn't be going down the river with these last two boats. There were always hundreds of miners down on their luck who couldn't grubstake the $150 fare back to civilization. There was the drifting population, the worst element of the town, which remained, waiting for the spring, when the boats would bring in a new influx of prospectors to be fleeced, robbed, and murdered in the back alleys.

"Heard tell," McGee said, "they found a man back o' the Gilded Lily Saloon last night. Had a knife stuck in his back. Didn't have no more than two bits on him when he was killed, neither. They took that."

Kirby didn't say anything, but he was thinking of Tom Shannon's mild warning. The enormous sum of gold dust he would be taking downriver was enough to attract the attention of dozens of men in this town, any one of whom would not be averse to burning his boat and killing every member of the crew to get possession of it. He wondered that they hadn't already attempted to raid these downriver boats at the end of the season.

Chewing on his cigar ten minutes later, he walked up the crooked muddy street to Main Street, Tom Shannon

and Jonas Flynn with him. They passed saloon after saloon, most of them jammed to the doors. Crowds of men surged along on the walks, faces flushed with drink, many of them having their last good time in town before buying tickets for the downriver trip.

Barkers stood out in front of some of the the larger establishments, buttonholing strangers as they came up, trying to steer them into their particular houses.

A heavily-loaded freight wagon was stuck in a pot-hole on the corner of Washington and Adams Streets, the main intersection. The driver had unabashedly unhooked his teams, stabled them, and gone into the nearest saloon, leaving the big wagon where it was, to be pulled out at his leisure. All traffic had to veer around the wagon.

Jonas Flynn said, "More people here than last year, Kirby. I hear plenty o' settlers came up this way in the spring, an' they're plannin' to stay if they can get through this winter, an' then buy supplies at reasonable prices."

"The prices won't be reasonable," Tom Shannon said grimly, "if the combine gets control up this way as it has below St. Louis. A barrel of flour will cost what a man earns during the year."

Kirby didn't say anything as he strode along the street, and Shannon added thoughtfully. "They come around to see you since you had the trouble with that chap down in Yankton, Kirby?"

"Haven't seen any of them," Kirby said briefly.

Shannon grimaced. "Reckon they haven't forgotten you, though," he stated. "One free boat on the river encourages the others to stay out. They can't really operate until they have every boat tied up."

"They'd better forget about the River Queen," Kirby said tersely. "She's a free boat, and she'll stay that way."

They were outside the big, two-story frame structure known as the Natchez House, biggest saloon and gambling house in Steamboat Bend. The Natchez House had

been owned since the previous spring by Sharp Granville. Kirby knew the man only by sight. He'd had an occasional drink in the Natchez House when in town, but that was all.

Going up the steps of the Natchez House, Jonas Flynn said softly, "Friend o' yours here already, Kirby."

Kirby saw Brandon Greene standing just outside the door, smoking a cigar. He nodded and smiled when they came up the steps.

"I believe," Greene said, "I owe you gentlemen a drink for bringing me safely up to Steamboat Bend."

"Drinks on me," Kirby told him, "for shooting up those Sioux that came aboard." He took Greene's arm and steered him inside. Flynn and Shannon scattered as they entered the saloon, which was jammed to the doors, the air stifling with tobacco smoke.

Huge cut-glass chandeliers dangled from the ceiling, illuminating the big room. The bar was of mahogany, seventy feet long, backed with mirrors, and every bit of it hauled up the river by the packets.

To the right of the door Kirby saw that a table had been set up, and a clerk sat behind the table jotting down names in his book, accepting money from the queue of miners booking passage downriver. A placard lay on the table with the words "City of St. Louis, J. Greene, owner and captain. Now booking."

"Your sister," Kirby observed, as they pushed through the crowd, "is quite enterprising, Mr. Greene."

Brandon Greene laughed merrily. "Understand you had a little scene with her. Judy always had a temper."

"She has that," Kirby murmured.

They had to wait a moment till they found an open space at the bar, and then Kirby said to the bartender when he came up, "Soap it on the mirror, Tom. River Queen leaves Steamboat Bend twelve noon, Tuesday, September second. Now booking."

"Right." The bartender nodded. He picked up a piece of soap and scrawled the words on the mirror behind him.

Brandon Greene said casually, "Business before pleasure, Captain. That account for the success you've achieved on the Missouri?"

"It pays off," Kirby told him. He poured two drinks from the bottle the bartender set before him, and then he said without looking at Greene, "Understand you were nearly in the river trade yourself. Your father was a river man."

"Not for me," Greene stated. "When I came out of college, Father wanted to give me a half interest in his boat. I turned it down because I wanted to see the country and not just the Mississippi River. When he died, of course, he left everything to Judy. She was raised on the river."

Kirby said thoughtfully, "Had you marked down as a river-boat gambler when I first met you, Mr. Greene."

Brandon Green laughed lightly. "Possibly," he said, "you were not too far wrong, Captain." He lifted his glass and he said, "To the River Queen. Long may she bring in high profits."

Kirby lifted his glass to his lips, and as he looked into the bar mirror just before downing the drink he thought he saw that little smile on Brandon Greene's face again. He didn't quite understand that.

When the bartender passed by again, Kirby said to him, "Mr. Granville around, Tom?"

"In the office." The bartender nodded toward the door at the far end of the bar.

"Business again?" Greene smiled.

Kirby nodded. "See you around," he said, and he walked off. As he paused before Sharp Granville's office and knocked, he saw Greene heading for a card table where there was an empty chair.

Granville himself, owner of the Natchez House, opened

the door to Kirby's knock. He was a tall, thin man with ash-blond hair and deep-sunk, pale blue eyes. A sick man, Kirby could see, from the red spots in his cheeks and the gray color of his face.

"Captain Trent," Granville smiled. "Heard you'd got in this noon." He held out a thin, bony hand, and Kirby shook it. "Won't you step in?" he asked.

"For a minute," Kirby said. He moved into the room and Sharp Granville closed the door behind him.

"How do you find things down the river?" Granville asked. He spoke with a faint Southern accent.

"We'd have prosperous times," Kirby stated, "if it weren't for the combine. They've got a throttle hold on most of the shipping downriver."

Sharp Granville broke out a box of expensive Havana cigars and extended it toward Kirby. He said thoughtfully, "The combine. What have you heard lately of the gray packet?"

Kirby looked at him curiously. "The gray packet?" he repeated.

Granville bit off the tip of his cigar. "I forgot you've been on the river for six weeks. You wouldn't have heard all the news. The gray packet is a mysterious ghost ship on the river, said to be operated by the combine to keep unruly members, and those who won't co-operate, in line."

Kirby Trent was staring at him unbelievingly.

Granville laughed. "Hard to believe," he stated, "but it's the truth. I had this straight from an Army officer who came overland from Fort McCloud, eight hundred miles down the river. This gray packet is the fastest thing ever seen on the upper river, and she can move in twelve inches of water. She's heavily armed with eight and twelve pounders, along with a few swivel guns in the bow and stern. She can blow out of the water anything afloat from here to St. Louis."

Kirby put the cigar in his mouth. He said, "Those are the rumors."

"The facts," Sharp Granville stated emphatically. "According to this Army officer, she wrecked the Henry Adams a few miles below Disaster Bend; blew a few holes in her bow below the waterline."

Kirby said slowly, "When did this happen?" He knew Captain Friedman of the Henry Adams well. Friedman was one of the few boat owners who'd refused to sign up with the combine.

"Early August," Granville told him. "Must have been a week or so after you left St. Louis. The Henry Adams was headed up to Yankton with Army supplies for the posts along the way."

"What's the Army going to do about it?" Kirby wanted to know, satisfied now that Granville was telling him the truth.

"The Army," Granville smiled, "isn't accustomed to chasing ghosts. Some of the Army men don't believe it, but on the way downriver you'll find the Henry Adams below Disaster Bend, her hull stove in, and no rocks within miles of the place."

Kirby thought about this. He watched Granville take a seat in front of the big roll-top desk in the room.

Then Granville said meditatively, "I understand you're not in the combine yourself, Captain."

"No," Kirby said. "I operate a free boat."

Sharp Granville shrugged. "The way it looks, Captain," he observed, "in short order all the free boats on the Missouri will be under it."

Kirby lighted his cigar and looked at the man through the haze of smoke. "That right?" he murmured.

Sharp Granville looked at him steadily, and then he started to laugh, his thin shoulders shaking.

Kirby said, "What's funny?"

"You're thinking I might be behind the combine,"

Granville chuckled. "I appreciate the compliment, Captain Trent, but I don't have the brains to run such an enterprise. I'm a saloonkeeper."

Kirby shrugged. "My business here," he stated, "is to ask your permission to set up a table inside the Natchez House. The River Queen is now booking for the return trip.

"You have my consent," Granville nodded, "even though the combine might accuse me of co-operating with you and blow my saloon to hell." His pale blue eyes were twinkling as he said this. He added, "I, also, have a request to make of you, Captain."

"Go ahead," Kirby told him.

"I understand the natural reluctance of upper river boatmen to take women passengers aboard," Sharp Granville said, "but I have a—a cousin in town who is desirous of reaching her home in New Orleans this winter. I would greatly appreciate it if you would book passage for her, Captain."

Kirby was frowning at him. "There will be over two hundred men aboard, Mr. Granville," he said slowly, "and you know we have few accommodations for women passengers. This isn't the lower river."

"I understand that," Sharp Granville said, "but I don't believe you would force a young lady to winter in Steamboat Bend if there was any way to get her downriver. Miss Mallote will give you no trouble, Captain."

Kirby nodded reluctantly. It was a superstition on the upper Missouri that women passengers were bad luck, and many boat captains absolutely refused to book them. Under the circumstances he had little choice in the matter. He said, "We'll reserve a cabin for her, Mr. Granville."

He saw a quick light of triumph slide into Sharp Granville's pale eyes. It was as if the man had been worried that Kirby would refuse him, and this refusal would have

been a terrible blow, a lot more important than the simple matter of having his cousin spend the winter in Steamboat Bend.

"You are very kind, Captain," Granville murmured. "We are highly indebted to you."

That light had disappeared from his eyes, and he was speaking normally, offering his thanks, but as he left the room Kirby Trent was puzzled. Why did the passage of his cousin mean so much to a cold-blooded saloonkeeper like Sharp Granville?

He saw the "cousin" ten minutes later out in the barroom of the Natchez House. Tom Shannon set up his table at the front door opposite the table set up by Judy Greene, and immediately a swarm of miners crowded around to book passage.

Kirby stood to one side with Jonas Flynn, and Flynn was talking excitedly about the gray packet, the story just having reached him, also.

"She's supposed to be headed upriver," Flynn was saying, "an' there's a chance we might have a run-in with her, Kirby."

"There's a chance," Kirby admitted.

There was a small stage at the far end of the saloon, and Sharp Granville had a troupe of entertainers for the benefit of his patrons. A girl had come out to sing, and immediately the customers started to yell happily, "Cherry! Cherry Mallote!"

Even Flynn forgot about the gray packet for the moment, looking at the girl. She was scantily clad, with dark violet eyes, and her hair shone in ringlets. She was a very beautiful girl, the most attractive Kirby had seen on the river. She flashed smiles at the men directly in front of her, and then she went into her song.

"Cherry Mallote," Jonas Flynn murmured.

"Sharp Granville's cousin," Kirby said dryly. "She's booking passage on the River Queen."

Flynn stared at him. He had no words for the moment, and then he said slowly, "Hell, ain't one woman enough on the Big Muddy?"

"Even one," Kirby murmured, "is too much for me."

As he watched the singer up on the stage he was thinking of Judy Greene, comparing the two. Judy was doing a man's job on the river, supporting herself, running a river boat. Even though she didn't belong in the business, he had his respect for her.

This girl with the pretty face and the tinkling voice and the ways that men liked was so much tinsel in comparison with Miss Greene. He could imagine Miss Greene now in the cabin of her boat going over the boat's books. This picture was considerably more pleasant than the one he had of her standing in a pilothouse brazenly steering her tub of a boat into his path.

After Miss Mallote had finished her song she came offstage, and Sharp Granville steered her through the crowd to introduce her to Kirby.

"Your charming passenger." Granville smiled. "Miss Mallote, Captain Kirby Trent."

"I am so grateful to you, Captain," Miss Mallote gushed, "for booking passage for me. I couldn't stand a winter here. I don't believe there will be ten women in the town after your boat leaves."

"That right?" Kirby murmured. She had beautiful dark eyes and red lips, and her white teeth sparkled.

"I will keep out of your way every minute, Captain," she said softly, "if that's what you want aboard."

Kirby felt his face reddening. Jonas Flynn was grinning from one side, and Sharp Granville was smiling from the other. He said rather tartly, "As pilot and captain aboard a river boat, Miss Mallote, I will not have much opportunity to entertain the passengers. We have very little to offer aboard the River Queen except passage to St. Louis."

"I understand, Captain," Miss Mallote murmured. "I shall do my very best not to get in your way."

Puffing on his cigar savagely, Kirby was quite sure she was laughing at him, too. When she flitted away he said to Granville ironically, "Your cousin is a beautiful girl, Mr. Granville."

Sharp Granville laughed. "Of course, she's really no relation of mine," he said. "She's sung for my house and now she wants to return to New Orleans for the winter. I'm doing her a favor by booking passage for her."

"I see." Kirby scowled. He didn't see, though, why a man like Sharp Granville, a single man who liked a pretty face as much as the next man, was so anxious to send the only good-looking girl in Steamboat Bend down the river, and remain through a dull winter here alone.

As they were standing there, an old man slouched up to them and handed Kirby a piece of paper. He said gruffly, "Note for you, Captain Trent." Then he shuffled off through the crowd.

Kirby opened the folded slip of paper, thinking it was a note from Fred Johnson, the engineer, who was still aboard the River Queen.

The message was printed in pencil and addressed to him. It was quite brief. It said:

> You are being given a last opportunity to co-operate with the Missouri River boat combine. If you wish to co-ordinate your activities with ours, have a white flag flying on your jack staff in the morning. You will be given instructions from there on.
>
> Your refusal must necessitate most unpleasant consequences.
>
> THE COMBINE

Kirby stared at the printed words, and then he heard Sharp Granville purr, "Bad news, Captain?"

Kirby looked around the room for the old man who had delivered the note. He'd taken no particular notice of the man, and the messenger had undoubtedly left the saloon immediately, losing himself in the hundreds of people in the streets.

"The news," Kirby said casually, "is what I expected." He slipped the note into his shirt pocket, touched Jonas Flynn's arm, and walked out through the bat-wing doors. He stood there on the porch, watching the crowd flow by, his jaw tight. Then he said to Flynn at his said, "How big a guard do you have on the River Queen tonight?"

"Three men," the mate told him.

"Double it," Kirby ordered. "Also, scout around this town and see if you can buy a few swivel guns. Have them bolted to the deck of the River Queen."

Flynn spat over the porch railing. "Reckon we're goin' to have a little war," he stated.

"We're in it now," Kirby Trent said tersely, "up to the hilt."

Chapter Five

At noon the next day the River Queen baked in the hot sun. The Missouri was as smooth as a mirror with the heat haze hanging over it. It was one of those steaming days on the river when the slightest exertion brought forth perspiration.

Kirby sat in the half shade of the aftercabins listening to Tom Shannon read off the list of passengers who'd booked for the downriver trip. As he listened he watched a man strolling leisurely down along the wharf, heading for the draw plank of the River Queen.

Shannon said, "More than half filled up the first night in town, Kirby. We'll have a capacity passenger list going downriver."

Kirby nodded. He chewed on his cigar, watching the man on the wharf step across the plank to the main deck of the boat, and then he recognized the slim, almost elegant figure of George Stainright, pilot aboard Judy Greene's City of St. Louis.

He'd been half expecting this visit from Stainright. The River Queen had been the last boat upriver, and Stainright would want to know the condition of the river, the depth of water in the various chutes and cut-offs. It was the customary practice for rival pilots to swap this information.

As Stainright came up the stairs from the main deck, Kirby glanced at the jack staff on his boat. Only Old Glory, as usual, dangled from the mast.

Kirby said before Stainright's head came up above the level of the texas, "That girl's boat going to cut into our passenger trade, Tom?"

Shannon shook his head. "Don't figure it will," he stated. "Plenty of profit for all concerned."

Kirby tossed his cigar into the river. He watched George Stainright swing around some chairs on the texas and walk back toward them, a tall, thin man, immaculately dressed, as was the custom with many river pilots. He wore a long gray broadcloth coat with the kind of flower-embroidered vest that was fast going out of fashion. His cravat was of polka-dot material with a huge diamond pin flashing in the sunlight. A gray beaver hat was perched on the side of his head with some affectation, and he carried a gold-topped walking stick. He considered himself quite elegant.

Tom Shannon grinned and whispered to Kirby. "Right out of the salons of Paree."

Stainright came up to them, bowing slightly. He wore fawn-colored kid gloves even in this heat, and he started to strip them off as he spoke. He said in modulated tones, "Have a nice trip up the river, Captain?"

"Tolerable," Kirby murmured.

George Stainright was the typical lower Mississippi River pilot, the dandy of the pilothouse, guiding the huge floating palaces from St. Louis to New Orleans, commanding for his services exorbitant sums. Kirby wondered why Stainright had come up the Missouri.

"Plenty of water in One-Mile Chute?" Stainright wanted to know.

"Twenty-four inches," Kirby told him. "I'd say that tub of yours could ride in fourteen."

Stainwright nodded noncommittally. "We went up to Laneville," he said, "without our spars." Pulling over a chair, he sat down, crossing his legs, leaning forward on the gold-topped walking stick. "You come through Wagonwheel Cut-off, Captain?" he asked.

"Wouldn't risk it," Kirby stated, "at this time of year. We crossed at Indian Bend, rode the west bank to Willow

Point, and then recrossed, giving Sandy Shoals plenty of room."

Again Stainright nodded, and Tom Shannon, who had been sitting by idly, listening to the talk, said casually, "Looks like a river pilots' convention, gentlemen. Is that Phin Glatz coming aboard?"

Kirby looked down at the plank. A heavy-set man in a rather soiled check suit was coming over the plank, walking very gingerly as if he were not sure of his footing.

Stainright said contemptuously, "Drunk as usual."

Stainright had jet-black hair to go with his thin, ascetic face. His eyes were dark, too, and his nose was sharp, slightly hooked.

"What does he want aboard?" Shannon murmured. He's not piloting a boat downriver this fall."

Kirby said nothing. He sat in his chair, shoulders hunched, watching Phin Glatz come up to the texas and make his way toward them, his red face shining with perspiration, greenish eyes bright with drink.

"A pleasure—a pleasure, gentlemen." Glatz grinned. He pulled up a chair without being asked.

George Stainright looked across the river, lips curled slightly. As Kirby remembered the man, he was a light drinker at all times.

Kirby said evenly, "You have business aboard this boat, Mr. Glatz?"

The drunken man had a mass of reddish-brown hair, thick around the ears. He had a blunt nose, and his mouth was loose, wide. He said, "Business, Captain? Usual river talk. Been holed up here all summer, an' gettin' curious about the river. You were the last man up." He paused when Kirby didn't say anything, and he went on glibly, "Have any trouble comin' by the Twin Sisters, Captain?"

Kirby said quietly, "The condition of the river shouldn't interest you any more, Mr. Glatz. You lost your

pilot's license last summer when you ran the Ruby Jones aground on Shark Tooth Shoal. You've been debarred from handling river boats."

Phin Glatz's green eyes narrowed. He said thickly, "Figurin' on havin' them review my case this winter. I'll have a boat next spring with the rest of you."

"You're a damned liar," George Stainright said without any emotion. "There's not a boat owner on the Missouri will let you take the wheel in his pilothouse."

The drunken man's eyes blazed. He leaned forward, and his voice shook as he spoke. He directed his remarks to George Stainright, and he said tersely. "You damned down-river dude! I might even be pilotin' my own boat this fall."

Kirby Trent's eyes flicked. He glanced at Phin Glatz quickly, noticing the sudden confusion that came to the man's face, wondering at it.

Stainright was a little puzzled, too, but he only said, "You're a drunken fool, Glatz. Have another drink to straighten yourself out."

"I came up here," Glatz grated, "to talk about the damned river."

"Come back," Kirby advised him, "when you have your license."

Phin Glatz glared at both of them, hatred coming into his eyes. He said slowly, "Gentlemen, you'll wish you hadn't said that before you get back to St. Louis this fall."

He lurched off, and they watched him make his way down the stairs to the main deck and then across the plank, nearly pitching into the river before he'd got across to the shore.

"A drunken fool," George Stainright said idly.

Kirby glanced across at Tom Shannon. The clerk's blue eyes were puzzled behind the spectacles, but he didn't say anything.

Stainright remained for another half hour, asking his

questions about the lower river, learning what he had to know, and then he left.

As he was going across the plank Kirby said to Shannon, "What did you think of Glatz's remarks, Tom?"

The clerk shook his head. "Only two boats leaving from Steamboat Bend this fall, and both of them have pilots. I'd say Phin Glatz was just talking wild."

Kirby nodded. He sat there, his chair tilted back against the cabin, and he wondered. He was confident that Glatz had spouted out something he wasn't supposed to say. It was impossible for Glatz legally to pilot a river boat this fall until he'd made his application to the Commission, and he couldn't do that until he was back in St. Louis.

"He booked for passage on our boat, Tom?" Kirby asked suddenly.

Shannon shook his head. "He wouldn't have the fare, Kirby," he said, "for either our boat or Miss Greene's."

Kirby frowned. He watched Jonas Flynn swinging across the plank, coming up toward them. Flynn had been scouring the town that morning in search of the swivel guns they wanted to mount on board the River Queen. The mate's wide face showed his disappointment even before he came up to them.

"Ain't a damned gun in Steamboat Bend," he growled. "Might be able to get a few down in Yankton, but that's almost to St. Louis."

Kirby nodded. "We'll have to do without them," he said.

He left the River Queen ten minutes later, and as he was swinging up along the landing, he saw Judy Greene standing on the shore watching one of her crew paint the packet's small boat, which had been placed ashore.

She still wore the gray flannel blouse and the worn skirt, but her hair this noon was pulled back and tied up in two braids at the back, tied with red ribbon,

making her look very young, almost like a schoolgirl.

Judy Greene heard his step on the boards and she turned her head slightly as he came up, nodding to him rather coldly. Kirby looked at the rather dilapidated City of St. Louis, and he knew why she'd come upriver.

The dangers here were greater, of course, with Indian troubles, lower water, a much more treacherous course all the way, but the profits were correspondingly larger. He respected her for taking the long chance, and at the same time he was a little nettled that a young girl should be bucking the upper Missouri. He said as he slowed up, "How do like the Big Muddy your first trip up, Miss Greene?"

Judy smiled a little, and it was the first time he'd seen her smile. Her teeth were small and white. He hadn't noticed particularly before, but she was quite a nice-looking girl, especially when she smiled.

She said, "They have a term for it downriver. Too thick to drink, and too thin to cultivate."

Kirby smiled, too. He'd heard the expression often on the river and it was appropriate. He said, "It's also a rough river, Miss Greene. The Sioux struck at our boat at Hat Island on the way up. From Yankton to Steamboat Bend you'll find the skeletons of at least three dozen good river craft."

He had intended to say more, but he saw Judy Greene's mouth tightening and he stopped.

Judy said flatly, "So you'd advise me to take my tub and head down to St. Louis, where the river is wide and deep, and where there are no Indians."

Kirby scowled. "The upper Missouri is no place for a woman," he told her.

"Is that why you're taking Miss Mallote down to St. Louis on your boat?" Judy asked sarcastically. "I understand she's booked passage."

Kirby Trent's scowl deepened. "Miss Mallote has

booked passage," he admitted, and he wondered why it had to be that he was always at odds with this girl.

"It would have been more appropriate," Judy said thinly, "if she'd booked on the City of St. Louis, where there was another woman. Or does she prefer the company of the handsome captain of the River Queen?"

"I was not aware," Kirby murmured, rather enjoying the sparkle in her eyes, "that I was handsome."

"As far as Miss Cherry Mallote is concerned," Judy snapped, "I was not making any personal observations." Her face was crimson as she said this.

"I am sure," Kirby said gravely, "you were not. Good afternoon, Miss Greene." As he was walking away he glanced up and he saw George Stainright watching them from the texas deck, a frown on his face, and he thought he knew why Stainright, a good pilot, had agreed to pilot the City of St. Louis upriver when he could have had better boats.

Coming back from town an hour later, Kirby found Yellowstone Sam McGee sitting on a barrel near the cross plank, spitting idly into the river, whittling a stick with his hunting knife. Slowing down, Kirby said, "Clouding up to rain, Sam?"

The guide spat, looked up into the sky, and said a little too casually, "Trouble brewin' other ways, too, Captain." He spat again, and Kirby Trent knew that this was the man's method of passing on information he thought the captain of the River Queen should have. Sam McGee had been sitting here for a purpose.

Slipping a cheroot from his coat pocket, Kirby inserted it between Sam McGee's teeth. He said, "I'm listening, Sam. What's the news in town?"

"That big fella," Sam McGee said around the cigar, "that damn giant, Zink Barabee, is in Steamboat Bend."

Kirby nodded. Everyone on the upper river knew or

had heard about Zink Barabee, the roustabout. Barabee had killed a man in a fight in a Yankton saloon; Barabee had broken arms and legs and gouged out eyes in river-town fights from St. Louis to Steamboat Bend. He was a tremendous figure of a man, at least 250 pounds in weight, and inches over six feet tall, a bully who knew his terrible strength and fighting ability and who loved to exhibit them.

"What about Barabee?" Kirby asked, knowing that you had to keep prying into Sam McGee to get out all the facts.

"Zink's fixin' to fight a man in town," McGee observed. "Reckon it's all over town by now. He's talkin' big an' he's talkin' tough, an' they're beginnin' to place their bets already."

Kirby laughed. "My money's on Zink," he joked. "Hate to be the man he's gunning for."

Sam McGee was shaking his head almost sorrowfully as he chewed on the still unlighted cigar. He said around the cigar, "You ain't bettin' on this fight, Kirby."

"Why not?" Kirby asked him. Yellowstone Sam squinted up into the sky. "Reckon you're the man Zink's figurin' on fightin' tonight, Kirby," he said.

Kirby had one foot on the plank. He took it off and he turned around. He said softly, "I?"

"Reckon if you're Kirby Trent, owner an' pilot o' the River Queen," Sam McGee murmured, "you're the one Zink Barabee is fixin' up to fight."

Kirby shoved both hands in his back pockets. "Why?" he asked.

Sam McGee rubbed his grizzled jaw thoughtfully. "Hell," he said. "Man like Zink Barabee don't need no damn reason for fightin'. Fightin's reason enough." He added, "Could be you got a name, too, on this river, Kirby, an' Zink's kind o' wonderin' just how tough you are."

Kirby nodded. It was a fairly logical conclusion. A bully like Barabee didn't need a reason to fight a man. He picked his fights when, where, and with whomever he decided upon, and Kirby Trent did have a reputation as a rough man in a river fight. He'd had a few fights in his early years on the upper river as a pilot, and thereafter men had let him alone, respecting his prowess with his fists.

There was the possibility, then, that the big roustabout wanted to add an established fighting man to his list of conquests. That could be the reason; and then as Kirby Trent crossed the plank to his river packet he happened to glance up at the jack staff.

The American flag was beginning to ripple a little in the faint breeze that was stirring the water. He wondered, then, if Barabee would have selected him if he'd put a white flag up on that staff, in accordance with the orders from the combine. For twenty-five dollars Zink Barabee would punch and maul his own brother into a state of unconsciousness. Was it possible the combine had hired him to instill a little fear into the heart of the man who was deliberately bucking them?

Kirby Trent thought about these things, and he didn't like them.

Chapter Six

JONAS FLYNN and Tom Shannon came back from town late in the afternoon and found Kirby down in the engine room with Fred Johnson. Both men were grimy with oil and grease, but the engineer had a satisfied expression on his face.

Shannon said with a shake of his head, "Damned if you look like the captain of this boat, Kirby."

"A captain should know what goes on in his engine room." Kirby grinned. "Scraping the Missouri River mud out of that number three boiler."

Flynn said grimly, "You should be worrying about your number three boiler with what's ahead of you, Captain."

Kirby looked at him, knowing that Flynn had also heard about Zink Barabee. Wiping the grease from his face with a rag, he said laughingly, "Not your fight, Jonas. Cheer up."

"I don't like it," Flynn scowled. "I've a good mind to take a half dozen of the crew an' go to work on Barabee. Might give him a little more respect for river men."

"Wouldn't do any good," Kirby said. He'd already accepted the fact that he had to fight Barabee. He couldn't run; when a man ran once, he always had to run. That was the inexorable law of the frontier.

"Ain't right," Flynn said tersely. "Zink's as strong as three ordinary men, an' he knows river fighting. When he fights, it ain't play."

Kirby picked up his sea cap and put it on. "Reckon I won't be playing either," he murmured. He slapped the mate on the back and he said cheerily. "Let's eat, Jonas."

It was a rather gloomy meal in the cabin. All of the

passengers had gone ashore now, and the officers ate alone. Shannon and Flynn were worried about the impending fight, and Kirby ate sparingly, not wanting a full stomach when he went up against the giant roustabout.

They had a cigar after the meal, and they sat up on the texas enjoying the cool breeze that had sprung up. Then they went ashore silently, the three of them with cigars in their mouths, Kirby slightly in the lead, his cigar tilted toward the evening sky, hands in his pockets.

At the corner of Washington and Adams, the big freight wagon that had been stuck in the pothole the night before was still there, with the driver at last trying to extricate it. A half-dozen teams of oxen were on the chain, straining, the bullwhacker cursing, gee-hawing, but the load wouldn't move. The heavy wagon lifted and then fell back again.

"Too stubborn to unload," Flynn growled. "Even bullwhackers have pride in Steamboat Bend."

The driver, face mottled and puffy from drink, cursed and slashed more vigorously with the whip. Again the wagon came half out of the pothole and fell back.

Kirby stood in the rear, watching. Already, bets were being made in this betting town; the odds were being laid that the driver couldn't bring his wagon out of the hole without unloading.

Tom Shannon said softly, "They'd bet on how many times a sick man would breathe before he died."

Kirby didn't say anything. He noticed a stir of excitement across the road in front of the Overland Saloon. Then a giant of a man, black-bearded, with a hatless, bullet-shaped head, pushed his way through the crowd, grinning, teeth showing through the beard. He had tremendous shoulders and forearms and almost no neck, his huge head resting on those wide shoulders like a pumpkin.

A man was yelling, "I have a hundred says Zink will pull her out."

The giant was Zink Barabee. Kirby watched him as he came through the crowd, inchest taller than the tallest man. He was wearing a checked shirt and the high boots of a bullwhacker.

Tom Shannon said, "I wouldn't take that bet. I believe Zink could lift a river boat on his back."

They watched the giant get down into the pothole and grasp the spokes of the imprisoned wheel near the hub. He roared at the driver, "Whip 'em."

The driver had been watching, eyes bleary. Moving up to his oxen again, he started to ply the bullwhip vigorously. The dozen oxen in the chain heaved. Zink Barabee crouched, his face close to the wheel. Kirby saw the muscles bulge in his arms.

Slowly the big wagon leveled out. The oxen surged forward. The wagon bounced as Barabee released his grip and the rear wheel struck the rim of the pothole. Then the rig rolled down the street and a roar went up from the assembled mob.

Jonas Flynn said sourly, "Reckon that's a little warm-up for Zink, Kirby. I still think we ought to work on him with clubs."

Kirby only smiled. He watched Barabee come out of the pothole and head back toward the saloon, where a dozen men were ready to buy him drinks.

Kirby walked on to the Natchez House, where Tom Shannon set up his table again and started to book passengers. He spotted Brandon Greene, playing cards at one of the tables, and Greene lifted a hand to him and smiled pleasantly. He wondered if Greene did anything else besides gambling.

Sharp Granville was behind his bar, chatting with a customer, when Kirby came up with Jonas Flynn. Granville's pale blue eyes had a sickly luster to them as he turned away from the other man and came toward them. He coughed several times, holding his thin hand over his

mouth, and Jonas Flynn said softly, "There's a dying man, Kirby."

Kirby didn't say anything, but the peculiar thought came to him that a dying man could also be a very dangerous one. A man with the mark of lingering death on him had little to lose in making a venture.

Granville came up, smiling, bland as usual. He said, "Gentlemen, the first one of the evening is always on me."

Kirby inclined his head slightly, making no objections. He watched Granville signal one of his bartenders for two glasses, and then take from the shelf behind him a bottle of choice whisky.

As he was pouring the drinks, Kirby said casually, "Been wondering a little, Mr. Granville, why you didn't book passage for Miss Mallote aboard the City of St. Louis. She'd have another woman with her on that boat, and she might feel more comfortable."

The lip of the bottle clinked against the glass and a startled look came into Granville's eyes. It disappeared almost as soon as it had appeared, and then Sharp Granville was smiling at them again, sure of himself. He said with that slightly slurred Southern accent, "Knowing Miss Mallote as I do, gentlemen, I believe she'd be more comfortable without a second woman around. Besides, that tub might never reach St. Louis, and Miss Mallote is a very precious cargo."

Kirby accepted this explanation, but for the second time he was quite aware of the fact that if Miss Cherry Mallote did not go downriver on the River Queen it would be a hard blow to Sharp Granville.

Granville went on, deftly changing the subject, "I understand Zink Barabee is gunning for you, Captain."

"With fists," Jonas Flynn muttered. "What are the odds, Mr. Granville?"

"Three to one that Barabee puts you under," Granville said to Kirby.

"It'll be six to one," Flynn growled, "when the story gets around how Zink pulled that freight rig out of the hole."

Granville said again to Kirby, "I wouldn't soil my hands on him if it were my fight, Captain."

Kirby toyed with the glass in front of him. "It's not your fight, Mr. Granville," he said briefly.

He began to notice that he was the center of attraction in the gambling house tonight. He could feel the eyes on him; he could hear the low hum of talk. At the door both Shannon and Judy Greene's representative were signing up passengers for the downriver trip. He strolled back to the door after having drunk to Granville's health.

A man said to him, "Barabee's in the Overland, Captain."

"That right?" Kirby murmured. He asked in mock surprise, "He waiting for me?"

"You heard the talk," the man said sheepishly.

Kirby smiled. He went out on the porch, Flynn following him, and a crowd came out on the porch after him. He noticed that there was another crowd outside the Pleasant Hour Saloon, and they were staring across at him.

When the news reached other saloons along the street that he'd come out of the Natchez House, they started to empty, also.

It was a silent crowd. They watched him curiously, intently, many of them already having placed their bets. They were wondering now if he had the nerve to go through with it, or if he would back down and return to his boat.

Yellowstone Sam McGee sat on the porch railing, his back toward Kirby. Kirby noticed that he was smoking the cigar he'd given to him earlier in the day.

Jonas Flynn said tersely, "Make him wait, Kirby. He's picked this fight. Let him wait for it."

Kirby put one shoulder against the porch pillar. He smiled and he said, "Wrong strategy, Jonas. When you're fighting Injuns the element of surprise is your greatest weapon. An Indian loves to surprise his enemy; when he's surprised himself, he's a poor fighter."

"Zink Barabee ain't no Injun," Flynn stated.

"He's a savage." Kirby smiled, and he heard Yellowstone Sam's grunt of approval.

"On the other hand," Flynn argued, "if you wait till Zink drinks himself a gallon or two of hard liquor, it might slow him down a bit."

Sam McGee answered that one. "Liquor never hurt Barabee," the trapper observed. "Oils him up."

Kirby chuckled a little at the mountain man's quaint observation. He went down the flight of steps, knowing that half the town of Steamboat Bend was watching him, from porches, through windows.

When he reached the landing at the bottom of the steps he hesitated. If he turned right the road would take him back to the river and his boat, and out of this fight Zink Barabee had set up for him. If he turned left, it meant that he was headed for the Overland Saloon and possibly a terrific beating.

He paused here for several long seconds, enjoying this moment of apparent indecision. This crowd was anticipating a spectacle, a gory fight, from which they would emerge unmarked, the winner or the loser of some greasy dollars. They deserved a little disappointment. He turned right toward the boat.

As he walked down the street, Jonas Flynn after him, murmuring his approval, he heard the low hum of disappointment from the crowd.

"Serves 'em right," Flynn rasped. "What in hell do you figure to get out of this?"

Kirby Trent walked about fifteen yards down the street, and then he turned in abruptly at a cigarstore.

The murmurings of the crowd stopped. He went into the store, a bell ringing faintly in the rear as the door opened and closed.

An old man by the name of Ned Garvey came out, nodding his greeting to Kirby.

"Any more of those new Havanas, Ned?" Kirby asked.

The proprietor pushed a box toward him and Kirby selected a half dozen, paying for them, slipping the cigars inside his coat. Jonas Flynn stood just inside the door, waiting for him, a little puzzled himself now.

Kirby said to the old man, "How's business, Ned?"

"Fair," Ned Garvey told him. "New administration wouldn't hurt none, though."

"That's so," Kirby agreed. "You hear that talk in St. Louis, too."

The old man pricked up his ears. He said, "You figure there'll be a change next election, Captain?"

Kirby shrugged. "Hard to say how a man will vote," he said. He moved around the room, looking at boxes of cigars, cans and jars of tobacco, racks of pipes that Ned Garvey had set out. He'd put out the bait, and the old man snapped it up. For the next fifteen minutes Garvey expounded politics, excoriating the present administration and past administrations of the same political color. Kirby listened gravely, enjoying Jonas Flynn's fuming impatience at the door.

Ned Garvey was saying excitedly, "Ain't no prosperity in a country when the goverment's killin' it with taxation." He pointed a long, bony finger at Kirby, who was listening gravely, and he said, "Time will come, young man, when they'll be layin' taxes on the money you make!"

Kirby nodded. "If they spend it," he said soberly, but with a twinkle in his eyes, "they'll have to raise it some way, Ned. What do you think of our treatment of the South since the war?"

This was another signal for an outburst on the part of the excited old man, and it was fully thirty minutes before Kirby left the shop. When he came out into the street he noticed that the crowds were still there, lining the porches of the saloons, standing in groups on each corner. Many of them had even been peering in through the window of the cigar store.

Outside, Jonas Flynn said grimly, "And what in hell did that get you, Kirby?"

Kirby shrugged. He stood on the walk outside, counting the change Ned Garvey had given him, noticing the way the talk died down when he came out. They watched him in silence now.

He said to Jonas Flynn, "More strategy. First they told Barabee I was headed back to the boat and the fight was off. Then they told him I was inside the cigar shop and they didn't know whether there'd be a fight or not. Zink has too many thoughts in his head now, and he won't be liking that. A confused fighter is not a good fighter."

Flynn said bluntly, "Is there gonna be a fight?"

"Come and see," Kirby Trent said softly, and he turned left toward the Overland Saloon.

As he passed the Natchez House again a score of townspeople fell in line behind him. Others crossed the road from other saloons, forming a solid line to the rear. They overflowed out into the road.

Moving past the Devil's Hat Saloon, Kirby felt someone come up at his elbow, and he caught the aroma of an expensive cigar. Brandon Greene was walking at his side, a cigar in his mouth, a smile on his face. He said to Kirby, "Didn't figure you'd run out on this, Captain. I have a hundred on you tonight."

"You're an easy man with your money," Kirby observed, "or maybe you've never seen Zink Barabee fight."

"I've seen you in action," Greene chuckled, "and the odds were to my liking."

"Always play the odds," Kirby murmured. He glanced back as they started across the street toward the Overland Saloon. At least two hundred men were in the mob that had followed him from the cigar store.

The porch of the Overland was jammed, also, and the men stared at him as he came up the steps, walking briskly now, wasting no time. During the time he'd been inside Garvey's shop it had turned dark, and outside many of the establishments' pitch torches were flaring, illuminating the tense faces of the men who had come to watch the fight. The flickering light was not complimentary. Where there was brutality or avarice in a face, the light exaggerated it.

The mob on the Overland porch stared at him greedily as he went by, pushing both bat-wing doors with his hands, striding into the big room.

There were four bartenders behind the long bar in the saloon, four men to ladle out the drinks, but only one drinker. Zink Barabee stood at the bar, his back toward Kirby, watching him in the bar mirror. All the other drinkers had made a rush for the porch when the word spread that the captain of the River Queen was headed this way.

Kirby walked across the floor, a bland smile on his face, and this time Jonas Flynn didn't follow him. Flynn pulled off to one side, that scowl still on his face, and Kirby stepped up to the bar a few feet to Barabee's right. He leaned over the wood, folding his hands in front of him as one of the bartenders nervously headed his way.

The crowd remained outside, jammed behind the bat-wing doors, peering in through the windows. Zink Barabee had a half-empty glass of liquor on the wood in front of him, and he was cupping it with his huge hands, glancing over at Kirby now and then.

Kirby said to the bartender, "Whisky."

He looked at Barabee in the bar mirror, noting the

small, piglike eyes set close together, the blunted nose. He had pointed ears set close to the sides of his head, and his hair was black, close-cropped.

When the bartender brought the drink, Kirby picked up the glass. He held it to the light for a moment, and then he said, "Barabee, turn around."

The giant straightened up slowly at the bar. A puzzled look was in his eyes as he turned around to face Kirby. Smiling at him calmly, Kirby threw the contents of the glass full into his face.

He heard the gasp from the crowd outside. One of the bartenders, who'd evidently been under some strain, let out a short, startled cry.

Zink Barabee staggered, pawing at his face and eyes, roaring hoarsely, "What's this? What's this?"

Kirby moved in fast, shucking out of his coat in one easy motion. He sank his left fist into Barabee's stomach, hitting him as hard as he'd ever hit a man in his life.

Barabee let out a big gasp, opened his mouth, and bent his head. Kirby's right fist swooped up, catching him full in the mouth. Barabee straightened up again, the blood gushing from his battered lips, several teeth loosened.

He was smiling, though, and Kirby Trent knew he was in for a fight.

"You want to start a fight?" Barabee mumbled. "Is that it, Captain? You want to start a fight?"

Kirby wanted to tell him that that was the general idea. He said nothing, saving his breath, knowing that he would need it during the next hectic half hour.

Zink Barabee was steadying himself for the first rush, and when he came he came swiftly, a surprisingly agile man for his bulk. Kirby avoided the rush, ducked under Barabee's swinging blow, which would have dropped an ox, and hit Barabee another smashing blow in the stomach. His fist felt as if it had struck a rubber cushion. It bounced off.

"Now, now," Barabee was saying. "Just hold still a minute, Captain. Hold still."

He rushed again, trying to pin Kirby against the bar, and when Kirby neatly side-stepped him he rammed into the bar, nearly upsetting it, shaking bottles and glasses off at the far end.

A half-empty bottle in front of him fell over and started to roll along the bar, spilling out liquor. Zink Barabee, scarcely thinking about it, picked up the bottle, tilted it to his lips, took one long draught, and then threw the bottle at Kirby's head.

Kirby ducked the bottle, scooped up a chair nearby, and hurled it at the giant. Barabee swept the chair to one side with his huge hands. He said as he came in again, "You want to start a fight, Captain?"

Kirby changed his tactics this time. Before, he'd been retreating from the giant, knowing that he couldn't hope to stand up to him and slug. His only chance of victory, and this was slight, lay in avoiding the big man and smashing at his face until he could no longer see to fight.

This time he fooled Barabee by suddenly going under his swing and ripping punches into the giant's stomach, hard, slugging punches that actually drove Barabee back a few steps.

Kirby heard the roar from the crowd, which had slipped inside and was lining the walls now. He kept hitting, trying to drive forward, switching his attack to the face, drawing more blood with several vicious, slashing blows under the eyes.

Then Barabee, stung, lashed out with his left hand. It was the quick swing of the giant bear, short and tremendously powerful. It caught Kirby on the right side of the face, slamming him to the floor.

Almost before he went down, Barabee was coming toward him. The giant went up into the air, and Kirby saw his boots descending toward his chest. He rolled away,

Barabee's right boot brushing his shoulder as he did so.

Scrambling to his feet, the right side of his face numb, Kirby skipped around one of the card tables on the floor. As Barabee rushed him again, Kirby rammed the table at him hard, catching him in the middle. The giant lunged forward over the table, and Kirby hit him a swinging blow in the face.

The blood was oozing from Barabee's mouth, from his nose, and from cuts under both eyes. Blood drenched the front of his shirt, but he seemed oblivious of it. Sweeping aside the table with one hand, he moved in at Kirby, rushed him suddenly, and this time Kirby didn't move fast enough to avoid him.

The force of Barabee's charge carried both men backward to one of the windows that looked out on the porch. A dozen faces were pressed to that window, but they disappeared as the two men lurched toward it, going through in a shower of falling glass, tearing the sashes from their places.

They landed heavily on the porch floor outside, and Kirby kicked savagely with his boots, throwing punches into Barabee's face at the same time so that he could get to his feet. On the ground with the giant he was through, and that was where Zink Barabee wanted this fight, if possible: on the ground, where his man couldn't dodge.

Kirby got up and moved down the steps into the road, where he would have more room. Barabee came after him with the same old ridiculous chant:

"You want to start a fight, Captain? Do you?"

Kirby circled him, looking for an opening. The big crowd lined both sides of the street, jamming the porches and the high places. He could see them clearly because more pitch torches had been brought up to give them light. He saw Sharp Granville and Cherry Mallote standing together on the steps of the Big Muddy Saloon.

Zink Barabee was driving forward again with the same

enthusiasm he'd shown in the first few moments of the fight. Kirby skipped back to avoid him. He lashed out with heavy fists even as he retreated, and several times he caught Barabee full in the face with the blows. It was the sound of a meat ax hacking at a chunk of meat.

Barabee had ceased trying to hit Kirby now, and he was intent only on closing with him, wrapping those powerful arms around his body, and throwing him to the ground. Kirby was well aware of the fact that it was going to happen sooner or later. Those heavy, vicious punches to the face hadn't slowed up Barabee in the slightest.

Once Kirby nearly slipped as he missed a punch, and he felt Barabee's huge hands graze his shoulders. Wrenching himself free, he slugged the giant on the side of the face, staggering him slightly, but Barabee recovered immediately and came forward again.

A heavy silence had fallen over the watching men. It was as if they knew, too, that it was only a matter of time before the giant made contact with his opponent.

They'd been fighting for fully twenty minutes when it happened. Barabee rushed and Kirby tried to side-step him. He didn't move fast enough, and Barabee's drive knocked him down. Again, he tried to roll out of the way, but the giant was on top of him, crushing him to the ground, big hands reaching for his face.

Desperately he tried to fight his way clear, striking up at the big man's face. It was over now and he knew it, but he kept hitting, digging the heels of his boots into the ground, trying to throw Barabee off.

Then Barabee's left hand drove his head back into the dust of the road. His free hand slashed downward, ripping Kirby's face, drawing blood. Looking up, Kirby could see the giant's bloody, pulpy face, weird in the flickering light of the torches. He had to get Barabee off if he didn't want to be pounded into worse shape than that.

Digging his heels into the dust of the road, he strained

desperately, wriggling his body, at the same time trying to protect his face from the slashing blows Barabee rained at him. He managed to catch hold of Barabee's right wrist once, but the giant wrenched it away, and then, realizing that it was useless to try to hold those tremendous arms, Kirby twisted himself, reached down, and grasped the big man's left ankle.

He was able to get a little leverage now, and he summoned every ounce of strength remaining in his body for the effort. When he yanked, Barabee lost his balance. As his body fell sideways, Kirby managed to loosen one of his legs and he kicked upward, the boot catching Barabee full in the mouth.

Barabee fell back into the dust, more blood pouring from his battered mouth. That kick had damaged him more than all the blows from Kirby's fists.

Both men got up slowly. Zink Barabee was a hideous sight, his whole shirt front covered with blood. He plodded forward, and a man yelled, "Watch it, Captain!"

Something dangled from Barabee's hand as he came in now, something that clanked slightly. He'd picked it up from the road, his hand having come in contact with it after Kirby had unseated him. It was a rusted piece of chain, heavy, dangerous.

Barabee swung his hand and the chain lashed at Kirby's head with sufficient force to scatter his brains in the dust of the road if it hit the mark.

Ducking, Kirby heard the chain sing past his head, and then he lunged in. With that terrible weapon in Barabee's hand he could no longer fight from a distance. He had to get it over with quickly, efficiently, because Barabee was intent on murder now.

He came up close to the giant and he started to punch, hard, short, slogging blows, his shoulders behind the punches, and he moved forward as he punched. He hit Barabee in the face and he hit him in the stomach, and

all the time he kept boring in, never giving Barabee a chance to swing that chain again.

He heard the giant gasp and groan as he staggered back, and he kept punching, using up every ounce of strength in his body in this last attempt. He dug his heels into the dust of the road for leverage, and then he came up with his fists.

Zink Barabee stumbled and staggered backward, mouth open, one eye swollen shut, the whole left side of his face twisted out of shape, but he still wouldn't go down. He staggered in a circle, trying to swing that chain, but his efforts became more and more feeble as the blows began to register in his small brain.

After a while his right hand, holding the chain, dropped to his side, and then his left hand fell, and he stood there, helpless, mouth opening and closing, terribly and completely whipped even though he would not fall down.

Kirby raised his right hand to strike again, and then he caught himself, looked into Barabee's face, and turned away. It was over.

He heard the roar from the hundreds of men in the street as they surged forward. He felt hands pounding his back, and he was disgusted. He wanted to get away.

Jonas Flynn had him by the arm, and the mate was saying, "We'll get you back to the boat, Captain. Your face isn't pretty."

He saw the girl, Judy Greene, then, standing with her brother. She was looking at him, and for a moment Kirby thought she was going to run forward to help him. His knees sagged as Flynn held him; he tasted the blood in his mouth. There was no strength left in his body.

She didn't come, but Kirby Trent had this satisfaction: She'd thought of it!

Chapter Seven

IN THE MORNING Kirby awoke feeling as though he'd been put through a clothes wringer. His face was stiff, swollen out of shape, even though Jonas Flynn had worked on him for nearly an hour the night before after returning from the fight with Barabee.

Every muscle in his body ached, too, and he had to sit on the side of his bunk for some time before he could summon enough strength to get dressed.

Shaving was a horror, and he made only a feeble attempt to scrape the whiskers from his face. After walking up and down the texas for a half hour, loosening the taut muscles in his body, he was able to relax sufficiently so that he could eat breakfast.

Jonas Flynn said to him thoughtfully, "It was a fight you were in, Captain."

Kirby grimaced. "Reckon I wouldn't want another one like that," he said glumly. The hot coffee braced him up a little. He sat back in the chair after he'd finished breakfast and he watched Jonas Flynn light up a cigar. They were alone in the saloon now, Tom Shannon having eaten and gone ashore earlier.

Fred Johnson, the engineer, stuck his head through the door, and Kirby said, "Jonas, when you go ashore, see if you can pick up some rags for me—oil rags."

"Rags are hard to come by in this town," Flynn chuckled. "Most of 'em are wearin' their rags."

Johnson smiled. He looked at Kirby and he said, "How do you feel, Captain?"

"In a week," Kirby murmured, "I'll feel a lot better." He thought for a moment, and then he said, "Thought I

saw quite a pile of oil rags in the locker in the engine room, Fred."

"Gone." Johnson scowled. "Disappeared, but why in hell anybody would want oil rags I don't know."

Kirby had started to put his boots up on the chair next to him. He stopped now, and he put the boots on the floor again. "Disappeared?" he asked.

"Thought I had a lot of 'em, too," Johnson explained, "but I don't. Man needs plenty of oil rags down in that engine room."

Kirby looked at his empty coffee cup, and then a frown came to his face.

Jonas Flynn got up. He said, "I'll be goin' ashore."

"Wait," Kirby told him. "I want you to make a thorough search of this boat, Jonas. Search every man's bunk, under the bunks, in the lockers. Go down in the hold, but search the bunks first, very carefully. I want you to find those oil rags."

Flynn was staring at him. "Why?" he asked.

"Oil rags burn," Kirby said significantly. "A man trying to set fire to this boat would want a lot of oil rags."

Jonas Flynn gulped. He said slowly, "Aye, sir," and then he was off, Fred Johnson with him.

Kirby came out on the texas fifteen minutes later just as Flynn was coming up the main staircase with a pile of oiled rags under his arm, his face white with rage.

"Found these under a bunk," he snarled, "an' the guy wasn't figurin' on washin' his face with them, either."

"Who is the man?" Kirby wanted to know.

"Sorenson," Flynn told him. "Yellow-haired fellow we took on at Yankton in the spring."

"Is he aboard?" Kirby asked.

"Gone ashore." Flynn scowled. "I'll get him when he comes back. He'll tell me what in hell he was doin' with the rags under his bunk."

Fred Johnson, who had been standing near the guard-

rail of the texas, said, "Some of the crew coming aboard now, Jonas. There's your yellow-haired Sorenson."

Jonas Flynn ducked down the stairway again, and he came back a few minutes later, hauling the crewman along by the arm. Sorenson was a young Swede, red-faced, blond-haired, gangling, the terror beginning to show in his pale blue eyes even before Kirby spoke to him.

Other men were coming up to the texas, conscious of the fact that something was wrong.

Kirby said to the blond man, "You like it aboard this packet, Abel?"

Abel Sorenson nodded his head vigorously. He stared at the white-faced Jonas Flynn, who was standing a few feet from him.

Kirby said easily, "Why did you want to burn my boat, then, Abel?"

The blond man gulped. He stepped back, looking around nervously. He gasped, "I wasn't goin' to burn your boat, Captain."

Kirby pointed to the rags, knowing full well that the man was guilty now, sorry for it. He said, "Those oil rags were found under your bunk, Abel. How did they get there?"

"I don't know," Sorenson mumbled.

Jonas Flynn jabbed a fist into the small of his back. "Tell him," he snarled.

"I don't know—I don't know," the Swede blabbered. He was completely terrified now as he stared down at the pile of oily rags on the deck.

"How much were they paying you," Kirby asked him, "and who sent you? I have to know that."

"I don't know nothin'," Sorenson gasped. "You got me wrong, Captain."

Jonas Flynn grabbed him and whirled him against the wall of the cabins. He said huskily, "Damn you, talk!"

"Let him alone," Kirby said. He walked over to the

guardrail and looked down on the main deck. He saw Yellowstone Sam McGee sitting on top of the after woodpile, whittling. He called, "Sam."

The guide looked at him, put the knife away, and then climbed down off the woodpile. He came up the stairs leisurely, and he looked at the group of men, at Kirby, at Sorenson standing against the cabin wall, eyes moving all the time as if seeking a way to run, but there was no place to run. Other crewmen were blocking the stairs. There were men near the cross plank who could prevent him from getting ashore if he leaped off the texas to the main deck.

Sam McGee said casually, "Somethin' wrong, Captain?"

Kirby nodded. "You lived with the Sioux, Sam, when you were a boy?"

McGee nodded. "Five years," he said. "Iron Man's Ogalalas."

"You know how the Sioux work on a captive?" Kirby asked him. "Maybe on a white man or a Crow they don't like?"

"I've seen 'em," Sam McGee murmured, and he looked at the terrified Sorenson.

Kirby said coolly, "I want this man to tell me something, Sam." He nodded toward Sorenson. "How would you go about it if you were a Sioux?"

Sam McGee scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Plenty o' ways," he murmured, "all more or less pleasant fer them that's watchin', but not so nice to him that's bein' watched. There's skinnin', now—one piece at a time. You peel it off in long layers, or maybe there's the pieces o' bone you drive up inside the fingernails. They're all very interestin', Captain, but I'm thinkin if it was me I'd like the little fire."

"Little fire?" Kirby asked pleasantly.

"The little fire the Sioux build on a man's stomach after they spread-eagle him on the ground," Yellowstone

Sam said. "Ain't a big fire, Captain, just a little one, an' a slow one. Takes a long time to get through to a man's insides. You use little coals an' small sticks o' wood, an' you keep it goin'. I seen a Crow prisoner once who lasted—"

Kirby had walked over to the guardrail and was looking up the river, not listening any more. Yellowstone Sam stopped and rubbed his hands thoughtfully. Kirby said over his shoulder to Jonas Flynn, "Spread-eagle that man on the deck, Mr. Flynn."

Abel Sorenson let out a brief, terrified yell.

Flynn said to the men near him, "Take him, boys. Take him."

They started to close in, and then Sorenson yelped again. He eluded the nearest man and he ran up to Kirby.

"I'll talk!" he panted. "I'll talk, Captain."

"Come inside," Kirby told him. He walked into his cabin, winking at Sam McGee, who was standing by, looking a little crestfallen.

"Wouldn't've been much of a fire," Sam McGee murmured. "Just a little one—mostly coals."

Jonas Flynn followed Kirby into the cabin after Sorenson had gone in. He closed the door behind him.

Kirby said to the terrified man, "Go ahead, Abel."

"Man named Caldwell," Sorenson muttered. "Met him in the Flyin' Eagle saloon two nights ago. Nice gentleman."

"How much did he offer you to burn my boat?" Kirby asked calmly.

Sorenson stared at him. He looked at the door, and then he muttered, "Five hundred dollars, Captain. He was to give me a hundred dollars tonight an' the other four hundred after the River Queen was destroyed."

"Where were you to meet him tonight?" Kirby asked.

"Back room of the Flyin' Eagle," Sorenson said.

Kirby nodded. He took a cigar out of the box on his

desk and put it in his mouth. He said, "Do you know what I can do to you for this, Abel?"

The man didn't say anything. He sat there on the edge of a chair, looking at the floor, his face pale now.

"I'm anxious to catch this man," Kirby informed him. "If you'll help us, we might be lenient with you."

"What do you want me to do?" Sorenson asked him.

"Go back to the Flying Eagle tonight," Kirby said. "We'll go along with you. We want this man Caldwell."

Sorenson nodded. "I'll do it," he said, much relieved.

Kirby said to Flynn, "Put a guard on him, Mr. Flynn. We'll go ashore with him tonight."

Flynn took the prisoner outside. He came back in a few minutes and he said excitedly, "You figure this Caldwell is the big fish, Captain?"

Kirby shrugged. "Hard to say, but if we catch him we're closer to the head man. I'd like very much to catch him. What about the Flying Eagle Saloon? You know it, Jonas?"

"Small place west end of town," Flynn stated. "Back room has a door to it, if I remember. They use it for card games sometimes."

Kirby nodded. "I'll follow Sorenson into the Flying Eagle," he said. "We'll let him go into the back room at the appointed time, and then I'll follow him in."

"What about me?" Flynn objected.

"He might make a break for the back door if he sees me coming in," Kirby said. "It'll be up to you to stop him."

Flynn didn't like the plan too well, but he nodded. "Sorenson said ten o'clock tonight is the time."

At a quarter of ten that night Kirby left the boat with Sorenson and Jonas Flynn. They passed the four guards with rifles patrolling the wharf, and Flynn said grimly, "They ain't no good if the trouble starts on the boat."

Kirby said to Sorenson, "Walk on ahead of us. Don't try to run away. Remember, there's no way for you to leave Steamboat Bend except on my boat or Miss Greene's. If you run I'll hound you until I catch you, and then Sam McGee will take you out to one of the islands where no one can hear you."

Abel Sorenson shuddered. He moved on ahead of them, and they followed as he turned into the main street. Kirby kept about fifteen yards behind as they moved east through the crowds. Jonas Flynn left him when they were within a block of the Flying Eagle saloon, with the intention of coming down a side street to the rear door.

He said as he moved away, "Good luck, Captain, an' be careful. If they'll burn a man's boat they'll do worse."

"I know what they'll do." Kirby smiled quietly.

He watched Sorenson enter the Flying Eagle, and then he stepped up onto the porch. He didn't go in immediately, not wanting to scare Caldwell off if he were still in the saloon and not in the back room.

Looking in over the batwing doors from a position a few yards back, he saw Sorenson go up to the bar, have a drink, and then look around. The bar was pretty well filled at this hour, and a half-dozen card games were going on at the tables along the wall.

The side door was to the right of the tables. Sorenson finished his drink, glanced toward the porch, as if to tell Kirby that Caldwell wasn't in the saloon proper, and then he walked toward the back door.

Kirby pushed into the saloon quickly. He was about a dozen yards from his man when Sorenson opened the door. Two shots rang out, and the blond man staggered back clutching at his chest. He spun, stared at Kirby, who was coming up on the run, and then slumped to the floor.

Sliding his Colt gun out of the waistband inside his coat, Kirby dashed for the door. He heard glass shattering inside the room, and then another shot, which seemed to

come from outside, followed immediately by two more shots.

The back room was dark with only the light from the saloon penetrating into it a short distance. Kirby could make out the window on the far side where Caldwell, or whoever had been in the room, had gone out.

On the outside Jonas Flynn was yelling, "Kirby! Kirby!"

Kirby found the door, ripped it open, and leaped outside. He found the mate crouching on the ground, holding his face.

Flynn was muttering, "Reckon he got away, Captain. He got away."

"What happened?" Kirby asked. He got Flynn up on his feet and back into the room, where he could see. Blood was trickling down the mate's face from a half-dozen cuts, and he was blinking his eyes. The right eye was cut badly.

"That damned glass," Flynn mumbled. "I was watchin' him through the window, Captain. Then he suddenly put the lamp out. I heard two shots an' the next thing this window smashes into my face. Couldn't see anything. I sent a couple o' bullets after him, but I couldn't see, Captain."

A curious crowd was staring into the back room now, and Kirby led Flynn out past them. Flynn was saying, "What about Sorenson, Captain? What about—"

Then through his one good eye he caught a glimpse of Sorenson sprawled on the floor. He didn't say any more.

Outside, as Kirby was leading him down the street and back to the boat, he said, "I saw him Captain. I saw this Caldwell chap. Small man in gray, gray hair, gray face. I'd know him."

"They might have seen us come off the boat," Kirby growled. "They were watching. Maybe he didn't figure on you being at the back door until the last moment, and then he decided to go out through the window after

shooting Sorenson. You just happened to be in the way of the flying glass, Jonas."

"I'll find him," Flynn kept saying bitterly. "I'll search this rat hole of a town until I find him."

Kirby didn't say anything, but he knew how slim the chances were of finding the combine man. Caldwell could hide out almost anywhere. Steamboat Bend was a big town, and there were dozens of boardinghouses where he could hole up until the River Queen left the city. He would be very wary now, possibly knowing that they'd had a look at him.

"We'll keep looking," Kirby agreed, but there was no great enthusiasm in his voice.

Chapter Eight

At noon the next day Brandon Greene stopped aboard for a word with Kirby. He said, "I shall miss the pleasure of going downriver with you, Captain, but I've booked passage aboard my sister's boat. I trust we shall meet again in St. Louis."

"We'll winter there," Kirby assured him. "When does the City of St. Louis cast off?"

"Tomorrow noon," Greene informed him. "Judy had anticipated remaining another day or two, but she has a full passenger list, and the old tub can't take too much of a load."

Kirby lifted his eyebrows. He hadn't expected the City of St. Louis to be leaving for several days, and this was a surprise.

"You'll undoubtedly pass us on the way down." Greene smiled. "We'll look for you." He held out his hand and Kirby shook it cordially. "Good luck," he said.

When Greene had gone, Jonas Flynn, who was standing nearby, said, "There's a decent fellow, Kirby."

The mate had had his cuts bandaged a little, and he was able to see again.

Tom Shannon, who'd come up in time to hear the remark, glanced at Kirby slyly and added, "Quite a sister he has, too, Jonas. She'll do well on the upper river."

"If the combine lets her," Flynn observed, and then he said to Kirby, "Wonder where in hell she does stand with the combine, Captain. You figure she's runnin' with them?"

Kirby shook his head. He hadn't thought about that angle before, but he had little doubt that combine repre-

sentatives had made overtures to every boat on the river, and they couldn't have left Judy Greene out.

Jonas Flynn was chewing on a dead cigar. He said grimly, "Still thinkin' about that Caldwell chap. Got a feelin' I'll run into him again, Captain."

"He can't leave," Shannon observed, "except on the River Queen or the City of St. Louis. He hasn't booked passage with Judy Greene, because I've asked her, giving her a description of the man."

"Three boats supposed to be up the river," Kirby told him gently. "You forget the gray packet, Tom?"

Shannon looked at him. "You believe in it?" he countered.

Kirby shrugged. "Sharp Granville does," he said, "and I don't believe Granville is a superstitious man."

Late that afternoon Kirby strolled down to the City of St. Louis and went aboard. He found Judy under the awning on the texas going over her books. She looked up when she saw him coming, and curiosity was in her deep blue eyes.

"Wanted to wish you luck before you left," Kirby told her as he sat on one of the guardrails. "Heard you were pulling out at noon tomorrow."

"Full passenger list." Judy nodded.

"Glad to hear it," Kirby said. "Expect to run the upper river next summer, too?"

"We've done well this trip," Judy explained, "and there's too much competition downriver for my kind of packet. We can't keep up with the fast river palaces, but they can't go to the places the City of St. Louis can go to up here. This seems like our territory." She looked at him sharply, and she added, "You have any objections to another boat working the upper river, Captain?"

"Plenty of room," Kirby assured her. "Profits for all, but it's a dangerous—" He stopped himself, seeing from

her eyes that he was on thin ice again. He smiled and he said, "You'll make out if you're careful."

"Thank you, Captain," she said, and for the first time she gave him a really friendly smile. "How do you feel after your fight?" she asked solicitously.

"Wearing off," Kirby told her. "He was rough."

"It was foolish fighting a man like that," Judy scolded. "You should have known better."

"Had to find out the hard way," Kirby chuckled. "I trust we'll be seeing you in St. Louis, Miss Greene."

"I—I'll be there," Judy murmured. It was an invitation, and Kirby knew it. He felt suddenly elated, and he moved over along the guardrail closer to her.

They both saw George Stainright coming down along the wharf toward the boat, and the sight of the pilot seemed to remind Judy of something. She said, "We had a curious theft last night. It seems someone stole George's pilot's logbook. He had the book in his cabin, but the door was unlocked. He's quite upset about it."

Kirby digested this information. It was indeed a strange theft. Stainright, like any other river pilot, could navigate the river without the aid of his logbook, but he had undoubtedly a tremendous wealth of information in the book that he'd compiled over the years, giving the depth of the river at various points at different times of the year, jotting down every shoal and every bar, indicating their change of position. The book was valuable when a pilot had not been able to exchange information with another pilot who'd just come up or gone down the river.

Stainright was coming across the planks, swinging his walking stick. When he saw Judy and Kirby up above him he slowed down, and again Kirby saw plainly the jealousy in his eyes. He wondered how Judy felt about her pilot.

"That's a serious loss," Kirby said. "George find out who took it yet?"

"He thinks the only man in town who would have use for it would be Phin Glatz. He's been looking for Phin this afternoon."

Stainright had come up the stairs to the texas and he was approaching them, nodding rather coldly to Kirby.

Kirby said to him, "Bad news about your logbook, George. You find Glatz?"

"Haven't been able to locate him." Stainright scowled. He started to strip off the gloves that he invariably wore.

"Why would he want the book," Kirby asked, "when he doesn't have a boat?"

"I'd like to ask him that question," Stainright said grimly.

"You still have no assurance that he took the book," Judy put in.

George Stainright didn't say anything, but Kirby could see that he was quite sure Glatz had committed the theft.

"If you'd like to look through my book," Kirby told him, "it's available, George."

"Thank you," Stainright said. He didn't say that he would, though.

Kirby shook hands with both of them. He said, "If you winter in St. Louis I'll probably see you."

Judy smiled and nodded, but Stainright didn't seem too enthusiastic about the prospect. They were standing under the awning when Kirby went ashore and back to his own boat.

He was finishing his supper at seven o'clock that night when one of the crew came aboard with a message from Jonas Flynn. It was a hastily scrawled note on the back of an envelope and it read, "Found Caldwell. Come quickly. Outside Silver Dollar Saloon."

Flynn had been in town all afternoon, hoping he might catch a glimpse of the mysterious Caldwell in the crowd that filled the streets. He'd evidently been successful.

Finishing his coffee in one last gulp, Kirby went ashore.

It was not quite dusk as he headed up from the riverbank toward Main Street. Glancing back when he reached the head of the street, he could look down on the River Queen. Three men with rifles were standing guard along the wharf. There were others aboard the boat.

The City of St. Louis lay a short distance downriver, lights beginning to blink in the saloon and some of the cabins. The river lay beyond, dimly lighted by a moon that slid in and out of banks of clouds.

The Silver Dollar Saloon was one of the smaller establishments at the west end of town. It was the kind of saloon a man like Caldwell would frequent if he were hiding out from someone, and at the same time did not wish to spend twenty-four hours a day in a stifling boardinghouse room.

Passing the Natchez House, Kirby saw Yellowstone Sam McGee perched on the porch rail as usual, watching the crowds that were beginning to fill the streets. The trapper nodded laconically as Kirby went past him.

Looking in through the bat-wing doors, he saw Brandon Green at the Natchez House bar, chatting with another man. Greene was holding a liquor glass in his hand, gesturing with it, that same easy smile on his face.

The crowds thinned out down at the west end of town, and when Kirby came up to the Silver Dollar Saloon, Jonas Flynn stepped from a doorway. He pulled Kirby back into the shadows where they would not be recognized, and he said grimly, "He's in the Yankton Saloon, across the road. Third man at the bar. Gray hair, gray coat. Short man."

Kirby had taken a cigar from his coat pocket. He put it in his mouth and then leaned back against the wall of the building before lighting it. The Yankton Saloon, opposite the Silver Dollar, was not much more than a hole in the wall. The bar was small, accommodating a dozen or more customers, but, like every other bar in town, it

was full. Through the haze of tobacco smoke, Kirby picked out the third man from the door. He was short and he wore a gray coat with his gray beaver.

"When I spotted him," Flynn growled, "I figured on walkin' right in and grabbin' him by the collar. Then I thought different."

Kirby nodded, smiling a little. "You're smarter than that, Jonas," he said.

"Figured this Caldwell might be able to lead us to the kingpins who are runnin' this business," Flynn went on. "He ain't the head man, from what I can see."

Kirby lit his cigar and he settled his shoulders against the wall. He said, "It might work, Jonas. You head back to the boat now."

Flynn stared at him. "The boat?" he repeated.

"Be safer if one man follows him," Kirby observed. "Two of us might arouse suspicion. Besides, I'd rather have you closer to the boat if they're figuring on starting more trouble."

"Hell," Flynn said gloomily, but he drifted off.

Kirby smoked his cigar for a while after Flynn had gone, and then stepped into the Silver Dollar saloon. He had a drink at one end of the bar, and from his position here he could look across into the Yankton saloon. Caldwell seemed to be alone. He had his shoulders hunched and his hands cupped around a liquor glass. Now and then he glanced around the room to see who had come in, and he watched each new customer carefully.

Watching him, Kirby had the man labeled. Caldwell had been in hiding all day in some hot, stuffy room, possibly knowing someone was making a search for him. The discomfort of the room had eventually driven him outside, and he'd sought refuge in one of the smaller saloons on the outskirts of town, where he was less likely to be seen. There was a good possibility, as Flynn had intimated, that he would be having a meeting with one of

his superiors. Studying him, Kirby was quite sure he was not the big man in the combine. The head man would not have had contact with any man of the River Queen's crew.

Nursing his drink carefully, Kirby watched the customers in the Silver Dollar, and at the same time kept an eye on Caldwell across the road.

Later, he went outside and took a seat on the bench against the wall, finishing his cigar there. He was in deep shadows by the wall, and the man in the bar across the road, if he could see him at all, would never be able to recognize him.

He sat on the bench for nearly an hour before Caldwell pushed away from the bar and stepped outside. By this time Steamboat Bend was wide awake. The long street was jammed, the crowd overflowing into the road. Horsemen picked their way carefully through the mob with drunks cursing them. A group of half a dozen tough roustabouts came down the walk arm in arm, roaring drunk already, and anyone who got in their way was thrust unceremoniously off the walk. They tumbled five men while Kirby watched them.

Across the road Caldwell looked to the left and right, and then headed east, back toward the crowded part of town. Kirby waited until he was half a block away and then he got up. He was able to follow the high beaver hat quite easily from the opposite side of the street.

Caldwell walked like a man who had a destination. He kept his hat down low and he walked at a fairly fast pace, threading his way through the traffic. Watching him, Kirby Trent felt his pulse begin to beat a little faster. There was a good possibility now that Caldwell was moving to a rendezvous with the combine head in Steamboat Bend.

They moved three blocks, Kirby going past the Natchez House again. Sam McGee was still sitting on the porch

rail, a pipe in his mouth, as Kirby went by. Tom Shannon was inside the gambling house, seated at his table, booking passengers.

Glancing quickly over the doors, Kirby didn't see Brandon Greene at the bar any more, and he assumed Greene was at one of the card tables. Caldwell was turning down one of the side streets that led to the water front.

Crossing the road quickly, Kirby headed down the street also, keeping close to the side of the nearest building. He could see Caldwell ahead of him, moving along briskly now, walking in the general direction of the boat landing. This was the last place he'd expected Caldwell to go.

Halfway down to the river, Caldwell turned off on a dirt lane. There were a few rivermen's shacks along here with lights gleaming in them. Caldwell went past the shacks, still angling down toward the river. He was walking away from the two river boats tied at the landing places, heading upriver.

Kirby was quite sure where he was going now. At the end of this lane, and along the water's edge, was an old abandoned warehouse that had belonged to Sammis and Smith, owners of the new warehouse farther downstream. The building was falling into ruins, half of it already being in the river. The old dock had collapsed and been washed downstream.

Knowing where Caldwell was going now, Kirby moved off the path to make sure that Caldwell didn't see him. The man in gray was about fifty yards ahead of him. He could see him vaguely, the moon being hidden behind the clouds again.

Moving behind the cabins now, Kirby angled down toward the warehouse, giving Caldwell plenty of time to go inside. Then he came down the grade toward the shed, feeling inside his coat for the Colt .44 he'd slipped into his waistband before leaving the boat.

He moved forward slowly as he came into the shadow of the warehouse, and he stopped, listening carefully. He could hear the water lapping against the shore, and the weird calls of the night birds out over the water. The smell of the river came to him, the night smell, dank and heavy.

Back in town a gun was banging, and Kirby counted six shots, evenly spaced, someone firing at a target. He heard the distant yells, the singing, the faint tinkle of a piano.

The rear of the warehouse faced the slope, and there were several small windows in the side, the glass out of them. He thought he saw a faint light inside one of the windows, and he headed that way, carefully, making sure he didn't start any pebbles rolling on the grade.

When he reached the wall of the shed, he crouched down, listening intently. He could hear voices inside, but he could not make out the words. Down on the river a fish jumped, splashing loudly, and the hum of talk stopped inside the warehouse.

Kirby waited until it started up again, and then he moved toward the nearest window. It was waist-high from the ground and he could easily look into it when he reached it.

He never reached it, though. The window was still a half-dozen feet away when he heard the quick rush of steps on the hard-packed earth behind him. Whirling, he had the Colt gun almost out of the waistband when the man hit him. There was something strangely familiar about that rush, and the weight and size of the body.

He tried to side-step the way he'd side-stepped Zink Barabee the night of the fight, but he was not fast enough. His body was slammed up against the wall of the building. Big hands reached for his throat, driving his head against the wood savagely, stunning him.

They were in deep shadow back here, and he couldn't

see the face or the form of his assailant clearly, but he had little doubt that he was fighting Barabee the second time, and now without spectators, and to a finish.

The gun was ripped from his hand as he was rammed against the wall of the shed. He fought back, driving punches into the giant's face as he was driven along the side of the warehouse, but his punches weren't hurting the big man.

He could hear Barabee grunt as he surged forward, grappling with his man, heaving him against the wall again. Kirby was vaguely conscious of the fact that other men had come out of the shed. He could not see them, but he heard one of them say something to Barabee just before the giant rammed him against the wall near the far end of the building.

He fell this time, tried to raise himself, and then lost his balance to roll down the grade toward the water's edge. His face and the upper part of his body went into the water, and it revived him temporarily. As he lifted his face out of the water, gasping for breath, Barabee fell on top of him. The giant's hands grasped him by the shoulder and the back of the head, forcing his face under the water and into the sand. He could feel Barabee settling himself on top of him, and he knew that it was the end. His face was under six inches of water, and Barabee intended to keep it there until he was dead.

Frantically he struggled to free himself, holding his breath so that he would last longer. He knew it was hopeless, though, even before he started to struggle. Barabee had the upper seat; he was infinitely the stronger man, and he intended to remain where he was.

Once he nearly unseated the giant from his back, but when Barabee had recovered himself they were out in deeper water, and Kirby's breath was gone. His head started to throb violently. The air had left his lungs in one long gasp, and the water was coming in. He tried

again, but his efforts were weak. The blackness closed around him. He felt as if he were being compressed into a very small space.

Then suddenly Barabee fell off him. Kirby's head started to come up to the surface. He was on his hands and knees in the water, trying to get his face out of the water, but his head was terribly heavy and there was no strength in his body. The roaring in his ears increased. Then he felt hands grabbing him, lifting him. He was out of the water, lying on his back in the sand, and he felt air coming into his body again. He lay there, gasping, choking, and then he heard Yellowstone Sam McGee's easy drawl.

"Spit it out," McGee told him casually. "Damn water never was no good to drink."

It was several minutes before Kirby was able to sit up and breathe easily. He was still shaken from the ordeal, though, and his body bruised from the banging Zink Barabee had given him against the wall of the warehouse.

He thought about Barabee, then, and he looked around. Sam McGee pointed. The moon was shining now, lighting up the water. Kirby saw something half submerged in the shallow water a half-dozen yards off the shore. He recognized the vague shape as the body of the giant Zink Barabee. Barabee's head and shoulders were under the water.

Yellowstone Sam got up from where he was sitting and waded out into the water. Grasping the dead man by the collar, he hauled the body to the shore, dragged it almost out of the water, and then sat down again. He started to stuff his clay pipe with tobacco.

"What happened?" Kirby asked, knowing that McGee would sit there till morning rather than offer the information voluntarily.

"Saw you turn down that alley," Sam McGee explained. "Follered you, an' saw some o' the fight. When Barabee

had you down under the water I dropped him with a shot through the back o' the head. Damned lucky the moon was givin' a little light at the time. Pretty dark afore that."

"There were other men here," Kirby told him. "Where did you shoot from?"

The trapper jerked his head back up the slope. " 'Bout fifty yards back," he stated. "Them two other fellers started runnin' when they heard the shot. Figure they ran back to town. Had to come down here an' pull you out, Captain."

"Recognize them?" Kirby asked.

"One was that feller you was followin'," Yellowstone Sam told him. "Feller with the high beaver. Other man I couldn't see."

Kirby looked at him. "How did you know I was following a man?" he asked curiously.

Sam McGee shrugged. "Done a hell of a lot o' follerin', myself," he murmured. "Reckon a man jest knows, Captain."

Kirby looked down at the dead Barabee on the sand below him. He said quietly, "If I didn't say so before, Sam, any time you want passage on the River Queen, it's free—any place you want to go on the river."

"Obliged," Sam McGee told him solemnly, "but there ain't too many damned places I want to go, Captain, that I can't reach with my legs, same as usual." He spat and he added dryly, "Way it looks to me, though, Captain, if this keeps up you ain't havin' a boat to take nobody nowheres, an' if you do have a boat, maybe you won't be able to take it anywheres."

Kirby Trent rubbed the back of his neck thoughtfully, and he had to admit the logic of the mountain man's statement.

"What in hell's all the trouble about?" McGee asked curiously. "I been hearin' things in the saloons."

Kirby told him briefly of the combine's rapid rise to power on the river, of the methods they were taking to get control. When he finished Sam McGee said with a grin:

"Kind o' like one o' them tough buffalo bulls I seen with the big herds. Wants all the cows to hisself an' chases away every other bull in sight. You don't know who the head man of this outfit is?"

Kirby shook his head. "Could have been the man with Caldwell tonight," he said bitterly. "In another few seconds I would have seen him through that window. Barabee showed up at the wrong time."

Yellowstone Sam looked across at the dead man and then he lighted his pipe. "Reckon he did," he said softly.

Chapter Nine

BACK at the River Queen a few minutes later, Kirby changed to dry clothes, telling Jonas Flynn what had happened. The mate listened intently, and shook his head.

"Reckon you shoulda let me come along, Kirby," he said. "We mighta had more luck."

"I couldn't have had less," Kirby said, "but I was mighty close to one of the big men of the organization, maybe even the head man himself."

"Too bad Sam didn't see him clearly," Flynn said.

Sam McGee, in the doorway, said, "What in hell you figure on doin' when you see him?"

Kirby was putting on a dry shirt. He said over his shoulder, "I like to know who I'm fighting, Sam. This way we're swinging at the air."

"What happens now?" Jonas Flynn wanted to know.

"We'll go into town," Kirby told him. "Night's still young. There's a possibility we might still run across this Caldwell, although I think he'll go in hiding now."

"Rather do that," Flynn nodded, "than sit here an' wait for 'em to hit at us. There are four hotels in town. I can check each one of 'em."

"Tell your guards not to let anyone on board this ship," Kirby ordered. "They're to question prowlers first, and then shoot if they receive no reply."

"They been told that." Flynn smiled grimly. "I have pretty good boys on guard, too."

At ten o'clock in the evening they entered the Natchez House, and Kirby spotted Brandon Greene where he expected to find him, at one of the card tables.

Jonas Flynn had left to make a circuit of the hotels. Yellowstone Sam had drifted off somewhere when they came into Main Street, and Kirby walked up to the crowded bar alone.

As he stood there he saw Cherry Mallote come out to sing. He watched her idly, thinking again of Sharp Granville and his peculiar insistence that Miss Mallote take passage aboard the River Queen.

Sharp Granville himself came down along the bar as Kirby was lighting up a cigar. He paused, smiled, and said genially, "You'll be leaving in two days, Captain. Expect a full boat?"

Kirby looked at the cigar. "Usually have a full boat this time of year," he stated. He watched Miss Mallote up on the stage. The Natchez House was jammed to the doors as usual, and the crowd was yelling, "Cherry Mallote!"

"We're going to miss her up here," Granville murmured. "The only bright spot in a dreary land."

"Why let her go, then?" Kirby asked him.

Granville shrugged. "When a woman has her mind set," he smiled, "there's no arguing with her, Captain. Cherry wants to go to New Orleans for the winter."

Kirby nodded. He glanced at Granville's always flushed face, noting the unnatural luster of the eyes. Granville was a Southerner, and a sick one. It would seem that he, too, would like to get out of this dreary land at least for the long winter.

One of the players had left Brandon Greene's table, and Greene was signaling for Kirby to come over and sit in. Granville, noting the gesture, said thoughtfully, "There's a pleasant fellow, Captain, a real gentleman."

"He saved my boat coming upriver," Kirby stated. "I owe him a lot." He drifted over to the table and sat down, calling for a waiter to bring him chips.

Brandon Greene said cheerily, "I haven't taken any of your money yet, Captain, and the night's young."

"You're welcome," Kirby smiled, "to what you can get."

Greene looked at him appraisingly, and then he said, "I'm afraid you'll prove a rough customer at stud poker, Captain, a blunt businessman, coolheaded, playing each card at its face value, taking no long chances."

Kirby shrugged. "It's paid off pretty well on the river thus far," he observed, and he watched Greene shuffle the cards.

There were two other men in the game, miners down from the mine fields, Kirby judged, parting with a little of the dust they'd sweated for during the hot summer. They played stolidly, each of them having had a little more drink than was good for a poker player. Greene seemed to have been drinking, too, but its effect on him was negligible. His brown eyes seemed to shine a little more, and his laughter was slightly louder, but never boisterous. Even in his drinking, Kirby thought, he was the gentleman from the Eastern university.

The stakes in this game were fairly high, because the miners had made out well in the gold fields and they could afford it. Brandon Greene seemed to be doing pretty well for himself in the game. Neat stacks of chips were piled up in front of him, and as the game progressed the chips continued to rise.

Kirby played poker as Brandon Greene predicted that he would, playing the value of the cards, waiting for the good cards to come his way, and then he wouldn't be bluffed. He won a fairly good-sized pot with three aces, beating Greene's two pairs, and lost several smaller pots.

You could tell a man's character by the kind of poker game he played, and Kirby watched Brandon Greene casually, discovering, to his surprise, that Greene was a plunger. He took the long chance all the time, depending upon the turn of a good card. He could bluff and get away with it, and when he lost a good pot he could laugh. But still he continued to win, and with honest cards.

Kirby watched him carefully because the man was slick with a deck of cards, but Greene's game was honest. Kirby was positive of that before they'd played thirty minutes.

A peculiar thing happened after Greene had won an especially good-sized pot and he was reaching forward with his hand to rake in the chips. One of the miners, a red-faced, squat, blunt-nosed man, pointed and said, "Dust on your sleeve, Mr. Greene."

Kirby saw it, too, a long smear of dust on Brandon Greene's right elbow. It looked strange because Greene was immaculately dressed, his boots highly polished, his shirt clean, his frock coat neatly pressed.

Greene withdrew his arm, looked at the smear, and then at Kirby, quickly. He laughed then, and he said, "These hotel closets should be dusted occasionally. I don't suppose they are."

He flicked off the dust with his fingertips, and Kirby forgot the incident. One of the miners dropped out of the game after they'd played about an hour, and another took his place.

By midnight Kirby was about even, but Greene had made himself something under a thousand dollars, a nice evening's work. Twice Jonas Flynn came into the Natchez House, and each time he looked over at Kirby he shook his head, indicating that he'd been unsuccessful in his search for Caldwell.

At a quarter of one in the morning, Kirby was thinking of pulling out of the game when it broke up quite abruptly. Cherry Mallote had come out again to sing, and she'd just started her number when a man poked his head in through the batwing doors and yelled, "Fire! Fire on the river!"

Kirby Trent felt a cold chill sweep through him. He gripped the table with both hands, prepared to push back his chair, when he heard the rest of it.

"River boat's burnin' like hell!"

Then he heard the bell of the volunteer fire department of Steamboat Bend, and the sound of men running and shouting outside. Brandon Greene was staring across at him, a queer expression on his face.

Then his chair went backward and he bolted for the door. As he went through he was conscious of the fact that Greene was with him. They plunged through the mob outside and headed west down Main Street. As they ran they could see the red glow in the sky down along the water front.

Kirby was sick at heart even before they turned the corner and raced down the street leading to the river. Hundreds of men were running, clogging the street.

The astounding report reached them even before Kirby saw it with his own eyes. He almost stopped running in amazement. Up ahead a man was shouting, "It's the City o' St. Louis!"

Kirby saw it then, Judy Greene's boat, flames already roaring up toward the pilothouse, the red fire gleaming in her cabins. He heard Brandon Greene curse—the first time he'd ever heard the man use bad language. Then Greene was ahead of him in the run for the river.

Downriver the River Queen lay, the red light from the burning City of St. Louis illuminating her. She was a little too far downstream for the flying sparks to reach her, and she was safe. Kirby could see his night guards standing by, under strict orders not to leave the boat no matter what happened.

Jonas Flynn came up with Kirby as he raced down the street after Greene, and the mate puffed, "What do you make of it, Kirby?"

Kirby shook his head, perplexed. He knew that Judy's engineer had started to fire his boilers tonight in preparation for the run on the morrow, but this fire appeared to have broken out above decks, in the cabins. It had not yet reached the lower portions of the boat.

A crowd was already at the wharf when Kirby arrived. Most of them had no idea what to do. Up on the texas he could see a few of the crew beating at the flames that were licking up the cabin walls. The pilothouse was already engulfed with fire, a flaming torch in the night sky.

Judy Greene was up on the texas, and Kirby saw her brother with her. He was gesticulating excitedly.

As Kirby and Jonas Flynn tore through the mob around the planks, sending men spinning in every direction, Flynn said tersely, "Ain't but one thing to do, Kirby, to save her."

Kirby knew what that was, too. It was a slim chance, the way the fire was roaring through this sun-dried river boat. They crossed the plank and raced up the main ladder to the texas.

Buckets were being hauled up now to throw water on the flames. They were trying to maneuver the fire-department hand pump aboard so that they could pump water from the river, but even that wouldn't do any good. The whole superstructure of the river boat was afire by now.

Kirby ran up to Judy Greene, seeing the strained, frightened look on her face. He said quietly, "Afraid you'll have to scuttle her, Miss Greene. It's the only chance you have. You're in eight feet of water at the landing here, and she might go down before the flames reach the hold. The water will put out the fire, and you might be able to salvage her later."

Judy nodded.

Flynn said, "We'll need axes, Miss Greene. Where are they?"

"Toolbox," Judy told them. "On the main deck under the ladder."

Brandon Greene had been beating at the flames with a piece of tarpaulin. He dropped it and joined Kirby and Flynn as they hurried down the stairs.

"What—what are we going to do?" he yelled.

Kirby explained as they struck the axes from the tool chest. He handed Greene one, and then he said to Jonas Flynn, "You'd better have the engineer and his crew douse the fires in his furnaces. She'll blow if the water reaches the engine room before the fires are out."

Flynn darted away, and Kirby led Brandon Greene to the forehatch, yanking it open. They stumbled down a low flight of steps, feeling around in the dark. Kirby kicked away a few empty barrels, raised his axe, and struck heavily several times.

He heard Greene doing the same thing a half-dozen yards away. Then he felt the water trickling around his boots. He put another hole in the bottom some distance from the first and then he called to Greene, "That'll do it. Up on deck."

They scrambled up on deck again, and Kirby yelled, "Clear the boat. We're scuttling her."

There was a quick scramble toward the plank. The bucket brigade that had been working on the texas came down hastily. Judy Greene ran down the steps with George Stainright, and for once Stainright was not presentable. He'd been sleeping when the fire broke out, and he'd had time only to pull on his trousers and his boots. His hair was mussed, and his face was smudged.

Kirby waited for Judy to go across the plank and then he followed her with her brother. Jonas Flynn came after them, saying that they'd managed to douse the fires in the engine room.

Another problem was presenting itself now. A sudden change in the wind was sending showers of sparks onto the roof of the big Sammis and Smith warehouse.

A man yelled, "She's burnin'! Damned warehouse is burnin', too!"

The heat from the burning City of St. Louis drove men back from the wharf, and now with the wind changing direction there was a good possibility that the big new

warehouse would be going up in flames, too, igniting a number of smaller buildings that were attached to it.

Kirby noticed with horror that these other buildings straggled up the grade toward the town. If the warehouse went up, it would touch off house after house like a string of firecrackers, and the entire town would be ignited.

Ladders were procured and men were scrambling up to the roof of the warehouse. The bucket brigade was again formed from a point up above the City of St. Louis. The hand pump was put into operation, and the walls of the warehouse were sprayed to keep them cool.

Already, however, the roof was burning in a half-dozen different places, and men were racing around frantically trying to put out the flames as more and more sparks fell across the roof.

Kirby got into one of the bucket lines with Brandon Greene on his right and George Stainright on his left. He said to Stainright, "How did it start?"

The pilot shook his head dazedly. "Heard the flames," he stated. "There were only a few of the crew aboard. By the time help arrived it was too late."

The heat from the burning packet forced the bucket brigade to bend away from the river. The boat had begun to settle a little, but it was doubtful if she would sink fast enough to prevent the warehouse from catching fire.

Kirby saw an excited little man standing with Judy Greene, gesticulating frantically, pointing at the warehouse. He recognized the man as Abraham Sammis, senior partner of the firm of Sammis and Smith.

Then Jonas Flynn motioned for Kirby to come over to the group around Judy. Kirby and Greene relinquished their places to other volunteers.

Flynn said when they came up, "Abe Sammis wants her to cut the boat adrift before she fires his warehouse. He's right, of course."

Kirby pushed his way through the crowd. He looked

into Judy Greene's white face and he could see that her nerves were near the breaking point.

Abe Sammis was saying vehemently, "I'm sorry to say this, Miss Greene, but you'll have to cut her adrift. I have a hundred thousand dollars' worth of merchandise in these sheds. If it goes up I'll have to sue you. Indeed, I'll have to sue you."

Kirby looked at the burning packet boat. Even if the water running into her hold did scuttle her quickly enough to save the lower structure, she would be at least a fifty-per-cent loss, and if Sammis' warehouse went up in flames a lawsuit would make even that loss an insignificant matter.

Kirby said quietly, "He's right, Miss Greene. I'm afraid you'll have to cut her loose."

Jonas Flynn put in quickly, "She'll drift right up against the River Queen, Kirby."

"We'll have to move," Kirby told him. "Does Fred have enough steam up?"

"Reckon we got enough to back out into the river," Flynn said.

Kirby looked at Judy Greene again. She nodded to him without saying anything, and then he broke through the crowd and raced down toward the River Queen. Fred Johnson, the engineer, and some of the crew were standing by, watching the fire.

"I put a little wood on," the engineer said laconically when Kirby came up. "Figured we might have to move."

Kirby slapped him on the shoulder as he raced up the ladder to the pilothouse. They backed out away from the landing place a few minutes later, and as they started to move, Kirby, at the wheel, saw two men with axes run up and hack at the ropes holding the City of St. Louis to the wharf. The burning packet started to drift slowly downstream. She was a mass of flames now, the red light illuminating the river from bank to bank.

Holding the River Queen out in center river until the burning City of St. Louis had drifted downstream to lodge in exactly the spot where the River Queen had been tied, Kirby swung her around and moved in to the vacated landing adjacent to the Sammis and Smith warehouse.

They had the fires on the warehouse under control by now. A few men up on the roof were beating out the last flames. The River Queen came into the landing slowly, casting her ropes.

Kirby Trent stepped ashore and walked over to where Judy Greene and her brother were watching the burning wreck. Neither of them was saying anything.

Kirby said to the girl, "You find out how it started, Miss Greene?"

Judy shook her head. She said dully, "One of the crew awakened me when he saw the flames. He'd been in town and was coming back to the boat. The aftercabins had been empty and the fire was burning first in them."

"That means it was set deliberately." Kirby scowled. He looked at the brother. Brandon was staring at the burning wreck down the river. His eyes were hard, but he didn't say anything.

"You know anybody," Kirby asked, "who would want to see your boat destroyed?"

"We're a new boat up the river," Judy Greene said quietly. "I didn't know that we had any enemies."

Kirby shoved his hands in his back pockets. He stood there, a frown on his face, watching the men coming off the warehouse roof. He said finally, "You figure it out yet that I'm the only man who will profit by your boat's being burned, Miss Greene?"

Both Judy Greene and her brother turned on him. He saw the surprise in their eyes, and he realized they hadn't yet got over the shock.

"How's that?" Brandon asked curiously.

"I get all the City of St. Louis passengers going downriver," Kirby told them. "I won't be able to accommodate all of them, but I'll have to squeeze about half of them on board somehow."

They were still staring at him. Brandon Greene said, "That's so."

"I didn't fire your boat," Kirby told the girl. "I had nothing to do with it."

Brandon smiled and said, "I believe you, Captain. You don't fight that way."

Judy Greene said, "I'm not accusing you, Captain Trent."

"If there's anything I can do," Kirby told them, "let me know. I'll arrange for passage for you and your brother on the River Queen, of course. You may occupy one of the cabins tonight, if you wish."

"That would be better," Brandon said. "You wouldn't want to stay in town, Judy?"

"No," Judy murmured, "I wouldn't care to stay."

Kirby hesitated a moment, and then he said, "I'm aware of the fact that you've just sustained a serious financial loss, Miss Green, so you needn't be concerned about the fare until you're in a better position—"

"We can take care of the fare," the brother put in quickly. "Thank you anyway, Captain."

Kirby escorted the girl to the cabin, one of the larger forecabins, and then he turned in himself. The big crowd on the wharf had dispersed as the City of St. Louis burned down to a smoldering wreck on the water. A few stood in groups for a while, discussing the fire and other big riverboat fires, and then they, too, walked back to town. The river became silent except for a faint hissing sound when a burning ember from the wreck dropped into the water. She'd settled in about nine feet of water. The charred ruins of the pilothouse still lifted above the wreck, the iron plating red-hot.

Jonas Flynn paused at Kirby's door before going on to his own cabin. The mate said quietly, "What do you make of it, Captain?"

Kirby shook his head. "Hard to believe that it could have been an act of carelessless on the part of a crew member," he stated. "Miss Greene claimed those cabins were empty. Still, a drunken man may have staggered into one of them and started to smoke."

"Either that," Flynn observed quietly, "or the combine was teaching Miss Judy a lesson, too. You've never found out whether she's signed up with the combine, have you?"

"No." Kirby frowned.

"Could be they sent her a note like the one they sent to you," Flynn told him. "Reckon she's not the kind will run up a white flag either, Kirby."

Kirby Trent didn't think that she was, and he found some deep pleasure in this thought. It was nice, too, having Miss Greene on board his boat, even though he was averse to women passengers, generally. He was beginning to realize that Judy Greene was not just another woman. He'd seen her fighting for her boat; he'd seen her take the loss of it with her head up, and he knew what a blow it had been.

"Be a run on the River Queen tomorrow," Flynn observed. "They been chasin' poor Tom already tonight, even while the City of St. Louis was still burnin'. If a man had a mind to do it, this would be the time to hoist passenger rates to St. Louis. They'll pay you the limit just to sleep in their blankets on the deck."

"Our rates will remain the same," Kirby said evenly. "We might be able to take half of Miss Greene's passenger list. I don't believe any more would be safe."

Jonas Flynn said that he'd check with Shannon on how many more they could squeeze aboard, and then he left. Kirby sat on the edge of his bunk for a few minutes, and then after a while he packed his pipe and went out on

deck, the excitement of the past hour or so having driven away the desire to sleep.

A full moon had swung up since the fire, and it illuminated the river. He saw someone sitting on a deck chair on the texas, and as he strolled that way he noticed that it was Judy Greene.

The girl looked at him and then turned her head away.

"Hard to sleep," Kirby said. "You don't have a river boat burn up on you every day in the week."

"She was a good little boat," Judy murmured. "I shall miss her."

"Expect to get another one?" Kirby asked. He noticed the way the moonlight illuminated her wheat-colored hair, lighting up one side of her face, while the other was in darkness.

"I don't have any real plans yet," Judy told him. "You don't find a river boat in your Christmas stocking."

"I found that out," Kirby said dryly.

"How many times did you run this river," Judy asked him curiously, "to earn yours?"

Kirby put one boot up on the guardrail and he looked down the river. He puffed on the pipe for a moment, and then he said, "My father was engineer aboard the big General Jackson. She was racing the Shenandoah one afternoon when she blew up just above Vicksburg. They never found him."

Judy Greene winced a little. "I'm sorry," she said softly.

"I was nine when it happened," Kirby went on. "I went to work as cabin boy on the big boats downriver. After a while I drifted farther north. I was three years a cub pilot learning the river. I'm thirty-one now—ten years a licensed pilot on the upper Missouri."

"You've earned your boat," Judy told him. "No one has a right to take it away from you."

The statement reminded Kirby of something. He said suddenly, "The combine ask you to sign up with them?"

Judy looked at him. "I've heard talk of the combine," she admitted, "but no one has ever approached me. I had no intention of joining with them anyway, but they've never contacted me."

Kirby rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "My mate seemed to think you may have turned them down and they fired your boat out of revenge."

Judy Greene shook her head. "I don't believe they'd do that," she said, "without first asking me to join, and they haven't asked."

Kirby digested this bit of information. It completely demolished Jonas Flynn's theory that the combine was behind the firing of the boat, but it left them exactly where they were before. They knew nothing. It was a little strange, though, that the combine hadn't contacted her after making such strenuous efforts to line up every other boat on the river.

"What'll you do down in St. Louis?" Kirby asked, changing the subject.

"I'll have to talk things over with Brandon," Judy said. "He says I shouldn't worry about it."

Kirby wondered vaguely what he'd be doing during the winter season. Brandon Greene still didn't seem to have any particular business, unless it was gambling, and he didn't believe Greene was a professional gambler by trade.

"Your brother puzzles me," Kirby said slowly. "He's a man with great talents, I believe, but he doesn't seem to be using them."

"I don't believe he's found his place yet," Judy explained loyally. "He hasn't settled."

Kirby didn't say any more on the subject, and a short while later Judy returned to her cabin. He was reluctant to see her go, and as far as he remembered he'd never been reluctant to see a woman go before.

Chapter Ten

In the morning, as Jonas Flynn had predicted, there was a rush on the River Queen. The seventy-five odd passengers who had booked on the City of St. Louis were all clamoring to take passage on the River Queen.

Kirby held a consultation with Tom Shannon and Jonas Flynn up in the pilothouse.

The clerk said, "We have one hundred and eighty passengers booked now, Kirby. How many more do you think we can carry?"

Kirby looked at Flynn.

The mate had been figuring his floor space on the main deck and the cabin deck. He said to Kirby thoughtfully, "Hate like hell to leave any of these boys behind if they want to go downriver, Kirby. We have practically no cargo to take this trip, and the load will be all passengers. Might be able to squeeze all of 'em aboard. They won't mind, as long as they go with us."

Kirby nodded. "Book them all," he told the clerk. "You can distribute the space for them, Jonas. If you have to take out some of the cabin walls, you may do so."

Flynn said, "It'll help some with George Stainright comin' downriver with us. Reckon he can spell you at the wheel, Kirby. We'll make extra-fast time with two pilots up here."

Kirby had had that in mind, also. Before, he'd had Flynn take the wheel when the river was easily navigable, but he'd been unable to do much night running. With a man like Stainright with him they could run day and night in clear weather, making St. Louis in much quicker time.

That noon Shannon set up his table in the Natchez House, and in thirty minutes he'd booked all of his passengers. Kirby went down with him and sat at the table as the miners queued up. He'd left the boat quite early, but he'd noticed that Judy Greene had left some time before he did, and he assumed she'd gone into town to make a few purchases, probably of clothing. She'd lost everything when the City of St. Louis burned.

Sharp Granville came down to the table as Shannon was registering the last passenger, taking his fare in gold dust. The owner of the Natchez House smiled at Kirby. He said casually, "A stroke of good luck for you, Captain, having the City of St. Louis go under the night before she was to sail."

Kirby looked at him, not liking the remark or the peculiar insinuating smile on Granville's face. He said quietly, "I regret very much that Miss Greene lost her boat, Mr. Granville."

"It was unfortunate," Granville told him hastily, "but of course business is business, Captain. Sometimes we cannot help but profit by the misfortune of someone else, even if she happens to be quite a pretty girl."

Kirby didn't say anything to this, and by his silence he indicated to Sharp Granville that he didn't particularly care for this statement, either. Granville strolled back to his bar, and after a while Kirby saw him step into his private office, closing the door behind him.

As Tom Shannon was closing his books and putting up his weighing scales, Kirby saw Phin Glatz, the reprobate pilot, come in through the side door of the Natchez House and go into Granville's office. It was a surprising act, because Kirby hadn't thought that Glatz was even acquainted with Granville. He knew, however, that Granville did make occasional cash loans to Steamboat Bend residents, and it was possible Glatz needed money. What he could put up as collateral, though, had Kirby guessing.

On board the River Queen that afternoon, Kirby watched the passengers taking possession of the ship. Those who were fortunate enough and had the cash to book passage in the cabins came aboard with their trunks and valises. The others staked out claims on the decks, Jonas Flynn and Tom Shannon making all the necessary arrangements.

Judy Greene came aboard at two in the afternoon, carrying a number of boxes and bags. She nodded to Kirby as she came across the planks, and she went straight to her cabin.

Cherry Mallote was not so casual. She came aboard an hour later, three men trundling her many trunks and carpetbags down to the wharf. She was in white with a red belt and a red parasol as she came aboard, and she walked directly up to Kirby as he sat on one of the guards up in the bow on the main deck.

He touched his seaman's cap as the singer paused in front of him, smiling, revealing those beautiful white teeth. She wore a Princess Eugenie hat, and her black curls hung about her white neck. Her shoes, Kirby noticed, were of red leather, and very small. She wore a gold locket around her neck, heart-shaped, with a red stone embedded in the center of it.

She said coyly, "I am sure, Captain Trent, you will want to show me your beautiful boat."

Kirby looked around. Jonas Flynn was busy; Tom Shannon was busy. He got up rather reluctantly, and immediately Cherry Mallote put her arm through his. He felt himself redden a little as the men nearby grinned at him. He said rather gruffly, "Not too much to see, Miss Mallote. You've been on river boats before."

"But not on yours, Captain," Miss Mallote murmured.

Kirby grimaced a little. He wanted to take her up to the cabin deck immediately, but she insisted on seeing all of the boat, including the engine room.

He looked in on Fred Johnson, and the engineer was again working with his oiled rags, cleaning every bit of his machinery. The lean, red-faced man looked at Kirby and then at Cherry Mallote. He scratched his jaw, but he didn't say anything.

"Have full steam up by noon tomorrow?" Kirby asked him, for lack of something to say.

"We'll be ready to cast off," Johnson told him. He added thoughtfully, "Sir."

They went up on the texas and Kirby told the men where to stow Miss Mallote's baggage. She had one of the large cabins aft of the pilot house. It was adjacent to the cabin Judy Greene was occupying, and as they approached the cabin door, Judy stepped out of her own cabin.

Cherry Mallote still had her arm hooked in Kirby's, and she was smiling up at him when Judy Greene came out. Kirby, a little flustered, made the introductions. He noticed that Judy's dark blue eyes were a trifle hard.

"I'm very sorry about your boat," Miss Mallote purred, in a way that indicated that she was not.

Judy nodded. Her eyes moved to Miss Mallote's well-manicured hand lying on Kirby's right arm. Kirby had the feeling that he wanted to tear the hand away, but he didn't know how to do it without offending Miss Mallote deliberately.

Judy was saying quietly, "We're the only women on board, Miss Mallote, so we shall have much in common."

"Naturally." Cherry smiled, and she looked up at Kirby as if to say that *he* was not going to be shared on this trip.

"If there's anything I can do to make you comfortable," Judy went on, ignoring the intended slur, "let me know. I've had much experience with river boats."

"With boats?" Cherry Mallote repeated mockingly. "How dreadful!"

Judy Greene's lips went taut. She nodded, and she walked away. Kirby saw her a few moments later talking with George Stainright down on the main deck. Stainright was just coming aboard.

"What an awful life she must have led," Cherry murmured as she looked into her cabin. "Imagine living aboard ship with only men around her all the time."

Kirby had it on the tip of his tongue to say that he thought she, Cherry Mallote, would have enjoyed that a lot more than Judy Greene had. He didn't say anything, however, and he continued to escort her around the boat. She went up into the pilothouse with him and looked out through all the windows.

"And this is where you do most of your work, Captain?" she laughed. "What a romantic little place!"

"It wasn't romantic," Kirby told her, "when the Sioux were shooting bullets and arrows through it on the way upriver."

Cherry's dark eyes widened. "Of course," she said quickly, "there won't be any attacks on the boat going downriver, Captain. Not with all these men aboard."

"I don't believe so," Kirby assured her. "We're looking forward to an uneventful trip, and a swift one."

He wondered, though, about the mysterious gray packet, police ship of the combine. Very possibly, the gray packet lay around the next bend in the river, waiting for them, ready to pounce on them when they steamed away from Steamboat Bend.

Cherry Mallote went ashore a half hour later, and the next time Kirby saw Judy Greene she gave him a curt nod, and she didn't stop to talk. Even when they ate that night in the dining salon, she directed most of her attention to Stainright, who sat next to her.

Kirby got up early from the supper table, excusing himself, and went up into the pilothouse to smoke. Opening the windows, he sat back on the bench against

the wall and felt the cool evening breeze sweeping through. He was a little nettled with Judy for her attitude. Cherry Mallote had been making a fool out of him as well as trying to make one out of Judy Greene, and she should have seen that.

Down below, he saw Brandon Greene just coming aboard. Greene had come down to the landing with several town acquaintances, and they'd been laughing and joking as they stood on the wharf a few yards from the planks. He'd been assigned a cabin with Jonas Flynn, Flynn very obligingly agreeing to share his small cabin with the likable Brandon Greene.

Kirby watched the man coming across the planks, pausing again to chat with some of the crew who were playing cards up near the woodpile. The men responded to him the way everyone else did, accepting him as a regular. They were glad to have him aboard.

After Greene had gone into his cabin aft of the pilothouse, Kirby saw George Stainright and Judy come up to the texas. They took chairs up near the guardrails, and the chairs were quite close together. He didn't like it, and he sat there puffing on the pipe grimly, wondering if Stainright meant anything to Judy Greene.

Tom Shannon came up to the pilothouse, closed the door behind him and then leaned out the window to look at the river. He said to Kirby over his shoulder, "Big doings in Steamboat Bend tonight, Kirby. Last time the boys will have a chance to load up with liquor till we reach St. Louis. We should be able to pour most of our passengers aboard tomorrow morning."

"That's so," Kirby agreed. He wasn't interested right now in drunken passengers.

"Understand Sharp Granville is throwing a big party for Cherry Mallote in the Natchez House," Shannon went on. "Farewell party."

Kirby didn't say anything to this, and Shannon went

on severely, "Man like you ought to enjoy himself more, Captain. You've a mind only for work."

Kirby laughed. He took the pipe from his mouth and rapped it out above the cuspidor.

"Go on ashore," Shannon urged. "Swing a girl in the Natchez House. It seems to me Miss Mallote rather likes you anyway, and there are five hundred men in this town tonight who would envy you for that."

Stuffing his pipe in his pocket, Kirby looked down at George Stainright and Judy Greene, some small resentment beginning to rise inside of him. If Judy preferred the elegant Stainright, and took such pains to show to him that she did, he had a right look elsewhere, also. A man would be a fool to do otherwise.

"You might have to pour me on this boat in the morning," Kirby smiled. "I'll take your advice, Tom."

"Never pour you," Shannon chuckled. "Only a fool will drink more than he can take, and you're not a fool, Kirby."

Kirby went downstairs, passing to the rear of Stainright and Judy Greene as he went down the broad flight of stairs to the main deck. They didn't see him, but they undoubtedly heard him as he went by. Stainright turned his head slightly, but Judy did not look.

Yellowstone Sam McGee was cleaning his Sharps rifle, sitting on top of the woodpile, as Kirby came down on the main deck. He said as Kirby paused, "Cool evenin', Captain."

Kirby looked at the gun and the oiled rags in Sam McGee's hand. "Expecting trouble?" he asked.

Yellowstone Sam squinted through the rifle barrel. "You expect it," he said sagely, "an' you'll never get it, Captain. It's when you ain't expectin' it. That's when they make you sweat."

"Who?" Kirby smiled. "The Sioux?"

Sam McGee shook his head. "Sioux ain't botherin' this

boat," he stated. "Not with two hundred or more guns aboard."

"Who *would* bother a boat with two hundred or more riflemen aboard?" Kirby asked him.

Sam McGee put the gun down. "Wouldn't exactly know," he said. "I ain't captain o' this boat."

"I'd appreciate it," Kirby said, "if you went ashore now and then, especially when we pull up on bad nights, Sam, and had a look around."

"Figured on doin' that." Sam McGee nodded. "Don't expect to see much, though, Captain. If anybody's makin' trouble fer us on the way down the river, they're doin' it pretty slick."

Kirby thought about that, and it was sound reasoning. It did not seem possible that anyone would have the temerity to attack a boat with two hundred and fifty men aboard, and if he did he would have to be very clever about it.

In town Kirby fell in with the throngs, many of whom were headed for the Natchez House. It had been rumored about that Sharp Granville was giving out free drinks tonight in honor of Cherry Mallote, and the place was jammed to the doors when Kirby arrived, even though the hour was still early.

Not wanting to buck the crowd inside, Kirby pulled up on the porch. He was standing with one shoulder against one of the porch uprights when he spotted Phin Glatz coming up the steps. Glatz didn't see him, but as he went by Kirby said to him softly, "Going down the river this fall, Phin?"

The ex-pilot spun around as if he'd been struck, and the fear came into his green eyes. "What's that?" he gasped, and then he recognized Kirby in the light from the flickering torches.

Stabbing out in the dark, Kirby said, "You find what to wanted in George Stainright's logbook, Phin?"

Phin Glatz's jaw sagged. "Ain't seen Stainright's logbook," he mumbled. "What in hell you talkin' about, Captain?"

"Thought you might have run across it," Kirby told him easily. "It was stolen from George's cabin."

"Why should I take it?" Glatz scowled. "I'm no thief."

Kirby shrugged. "Only three pilots in Steamboat Bend," he stated blandly. "You, Stainright, and myself. That book is good only to a pilot. I have my own."

Phin Glatz had recovered his composure somewhat, and he said belligerently, "I don't like bein' called a thief, Captain. Besides, I got no use for a logbook until I get my license back."

"That right?" Kirby murmured. He stood there, smiling at Glatz, knowing that the pressure was still on the man.

Then Sharp Granville pushed out through the crowd around the doors, coming straight toward them. He said to Kirby, "Glad to see you've joined our little party, Captain. Step inside and we'll have a drink to the success of the River Queen."

Very clearly Kirby saw him flash a look at Glatz that conveyed the meaning that the ex-pilot should move on. Glatz scowled as he pushed on into the barroom. He said over his shoulder, "You're wrong, Captain, dead wrong."

Kirby Trent knew very definitely, though, that he'd been right. It was Phin Glatz who'd got possession of Stainright's logbook, very possibly bribing one of Judy Greene's crew to commit the actual theft.

It was still not clear, though, why he needed the book. A possible explanation came to Kirby as he was following Sharp Granville into the Natchez House. Only the River Queen was upriver at this time of year, and Glatz could have no wild dream of piloting that down the Missouri. The only other boat that might be in the vicinity was the mysterious gray packet of the combine. Was it pos-

sible that Glatz was the pilot of the gray packet, which was now tied up in some cove a short distance down the Missouri?

Kirby considered that fact very carefully as he bellied up to the bar with Granville. He was quite certain, too, that Glatz had some kind of tie-in with Sharp Granville, and Granville had laughingly denied that he had anything to do with the combine. Granville, of course, could have been lying.

"Your health," Granville said when the bartender brought them a bottle and glasses, "and a fast trip down the river."

"Thank you," Kirby said.

"With two women aboard," Granville bantered, "it should be a pleasant voyage, Captain."

"I did not arrange for the passage of either woman," Kirby reminded him coldly.

Sharp Granville laughed gaily. "You're a cold man, Captain Trent," he chuckled.

Kirby downed his drink, wishing he were in different company, wondering too, why he'd come down here. It had been an act of foolishness brought about by Judy Greene's aloofness.

He didn't stay long. For an hour or so he filled in at a card game, and he listened to Cherry Mallote sing. It was still an hour or so before midnight when he cashed in his chips at the bar and left the gambling house. He met George Stainright coming up the steps, and he was a little surprised.

"Celebrating, George?" he asked.

"Hell," Stainright growled. "Hell."

He walked on into the saloon, leaving Kirby staring.

Yellowstone Sam McGee fell in step with him as he started down the street toward the river. He noticed that the trapper had a Colt gun stuck in his belt, and he said thoughtfully, "Zink Barabee's dead, Sam."

"An' there's others," Sam McGee told him. "Allus others."

"You didn't do any drinking back there," Kirby chided him, "and the last night ashore."

Yellowstone Sam shrugged. "Figured on this trip most of us better stay sober, Captain, dead sober, right from the start."

They walked along in silence for a few moments, and then Kirby said, "You saw Stainright come in, Sam. What was the matter with him?" From past experience he knew that Sam McGee had an uncanny knowledge of practically all matters round about him.

The trapper spat, and Kirby thought he heard him chuckle before he spoke. The humor was in his voice, and he said rather dryly, "Reckon George Stainright's sparkin' a woman, Captain."

He didn't say any more, but more was coming. Kirby walked along with him, counting off a dozen steps before Sam McGee finished his observation.

"Like in the old-fashioned muzzle-loaders," the trapper went on. "Flint makes a spark, but the spark don't catch if the powder's wet. Could be George's powder was wet, Captain."

Kirby grinned broadly, and he felt much better. When they went aboard he noticed the light in Judy Greene's cabin. It was a friendly light.

In the morning the passengers started to straggle aboard, many of them still carrying the load they'd picked up in Sharp Granville's Natchez House. They came loaded down with blankets and luggage, filling every foot of deck space. By eleven o'clock in the morning most of the passengers were aboard with only a few stragglers still running down from the town.

At a quarter of twelve Tom Shannon announced that all passengers had checked aboard except Cherry Mallote.

"Depend on a woman to be last," the clerk growled. "She'll hold us up, Kirby."

"We cast off ropes at twelve sharp," Kirby told him, "whether she's aboard or not. That's an order."

Shannon looked at him. "Aye, sir," he murmured, but he was grinning as he said it.

Cherry Mallote came aboard with five minutes to spare. Sharp Granville accompanied her to the boat. The wharf was packed as they prepared to cast off. Up in the pilothouse, Kirby looked down at them.

Sharp Granville lifted a hand to him and he nodded. It was a warm September day, the heat haze on the river, very little breeze. Steam was hissing up from the steam gauges. Columns of white wood smoke lifted up into the still air from the twin stacks.

Jonas Flynn, on the main deck, looked up at Kirby, and Kirby rang his bells. The ropes were cast off, and the big paddle wheel started to revolve slowly.

A cheer broke out from the crowd on the shore and the jammed passengers on the decks. Yard by yard they moved away from the landing place. Sharp Granville was leaning against the corner of the Sammis and Smith warehouse, a cigar in his mouth. Kirby saw Phin Glatz come up and stand beside him.

George Stainright had come up into the pilothouse and was now sitting glumly on the bench to the rear. Kirby said to him as he made his turn out in mid-river and headed south, "We should make Pierre's Island by sunset, George, with any luck."

Stainright grunted his assent. Kirby kept the River Queen out in center river, going downstream, taking advantage of the strong tide. They swung around Steamboat Bend promontory, and the town was left behind.

"Work four-hour shifts," Kirby said. "You'll come on at four till eight. We'll run till midnight if the weather holds."

Stainright grunted again, and Kirby said to him, "You're in a bad mood, George."

"Hell with all women," the pilot growled.

"I know," Kirby murmured, and his eyes twinkled.

Down below he saw Brandon Greene and his sister strolling through the crowd on the texas. Judy was holding her brother's arm. Cherry Mallote had taken to her cabin.

When they were about fifteen miles down the river, Tom Shannon came up to the pilothouse, his passenger list in his hand, a broad grin on his face.

"What's funny?" Kirby asked him.

"Little mix-up here," Shannon chuckled. "You see those last two passengers to come aboard?"

Kirby remembered them—two drunks who had staggered over the planks a few minutes after Cherry Mallote came aboard. They'd created a little excitement at the wharf when one of them nearly fell overboard just as he reached the deck. Willing hands had dragged him up from the plank just before the ropes were cast off.

"I have two hundred and forty-six passengers on the list," Shannon was saying, "and two hundred and forty-seven aboard. The fact is, however, that I'm missing a passenger."

"What happened?" Kirby asked him curiously.

"Those two drunks," Shannon grinned, "were supposed to see a third drunk off on the River Queen. Seems they were all at Granville's party last night and still celebrating this morning. When you blew your last whistle call they made it down to the river before we cast off, but it seems they forgot to bring the passenger along. I'd like to see his face when he sobers up."

Kirby enjoyed the little joke. He said over his shoulder to Stainright, "You hear that, George?"

"It's not funny." The pilot scowled and Kirby heard the door slam as he went out.

Shannon said curiously, "What's wrong with him?"

Kirby Trent squinted down the river. "Seems his powder was wet," he drawled.

At four o'clock in the afternoon, Stainright came up to the pilothouse to take his turn at the wheel. Kirby said to him as he stepped aside, "Ten feet of water in the Wind Island passage."

"I noticed," Stainright said.

Wind Island was still thirty miles down the river, but Kirby had been watching the watermarks along the shore. The river had dropped a little more since they'd come up, but there was still ten feet in the Wind Island channel, which meant that they would have no difficulty in any of the other low-water runs.

Touching a match to his cigar, Kirby stood a little to one side of the pilot. He said, "You've heard the talk of the gray packet, George?"

"I've heard it," Stainright said briefly.

"It might be talk that she's up this way," Kirby said, "or it might not be talk."

"What are the orders?" Stainright asked calmly.

"Run for the bank if you see a strange boat on the river," Kirby told him. "We don't have any cannon aboard, but we have plenty of rifles and some good riflemen. If we can make it to the shore and tie up, preferably in a sheltered cove, they won't be able to do much with us."

"Except keep us there for the winter," Stainright observed. "One week from now even the City of St. Louis couldn't go down this river, Kirby. She's falling that fast."

Kirby frowned, not liking the picture. He said, "We'll hope there's no gray packet, George, but run for the bank anyway."

"Aye, sir." Stainright nodded.

Kirby puffed on the cigar. "Another thing," he said.

"What's that?"

"There are plenty of women down in St. Louis, George," Kirby told him.

"Hell with 'em," Stainright said, but he was feeling better at the wheel of a river packet again. Kirby could see that from the way he stood there, gripping the wheel, studying the banks as he went by.

The ship's officers and the cabin passengers ate at the dining table in the saloon. Kirby saw Judy Greene for the first time that day when he sat down for the evening meal.

Cherry Mallote swept from her cabin and took a seat next to him at the table. Judy was on the opposite side of the table with her brother. She nodded politely to Kirby, but she didn't say anything.

Brandon said, "We're making good time, Captain."

"Fair," Kirby told him. "We'll make better time farther down the river when she opens up."

"It must be thrilling," Miss Mallote laughed, "high up in that pilothouse guiding the boat. You must show me how to navigate the river sometime, Captain."

"Mr. Stainright is up there now," Kirby told her blandly. "I'm sure he'd be glad to show you, Miss Mallote."

Across the table Brandon Greene grinned at him, but Judy looked down at her plate, saying nothing.

Brandon said, "I noticed you put Yellowstone Sam ashore this afternoon, Captain. Expect to pick him up again?"

Kirby nodded. "We've been going around Horseshoe Bend, a thirty-mile run. Sam can cross the neck of land in less than an hour. It's only a few miles across."

"He after fresh meat?" Brandon questioned.

"Meat," Kirby said, "and other things."

He noticed that Stainright was already turning in toward Cutter's Point, where a man by the name of Cutter had maintained a wood hawk's establishment. Sam Mc-

Gee was to be waiting at the point when the River Queen completed the big bend of the river.

Thirty minutes later, as Kirby got up from the table, the River Queen nosed into the bank, picked up the trapper, and then backed out again. He'd shot a deer as he crossed the neck, and the carcass was being carried to the cook's galley, where it would be cut up.

Kirby said to the trapper, "Plenty of game along the river, Sam?"

"Plenty," Yellowstone Sam said.

"Anything else?" Kirby asked him.

Sam McGee spat over the bow. "Not yet," he said laconically.

It was quite dark when Kirby went up to the pilothouse to relieve George Stainright. The moon was just coming up above the sandbanks along the west shore, throwing its silvery light across the waters.

Stainright said as a matter of courtesy, "We're off Yellow Banks, Captain."

"Thank you." Kirby nodded as he took the wheel.

"No gray packet in sight." Stainright grinned. "Or was it supposed to be pink?"

"We'll find out," Kirby said.

When Stainright went below he stood at the wheel, whistling softly. He enjoyed these night runs with the feel of the current pushing them along. Going downriver was always more pleasant because you could stay out in center river where it was safe, and there were no sawyers to rip into or drifting trees to avoid.

Below Arrow Island he kept the bow of the River Queen lined on the Buffalo Hump, made his crossing, and entered a long stretch of open water. He was packing his pipe with one hand when he heard the door open softly behind him, and then Cherry Mallote's voice.

"It's a beautiful night to learn the river, Captain," she said softly.

Kirby frowned. "Not a good business having a woman in the pilothouse," he said.

"Must it be business?" Cherry said.

He heard her coming up to stand beside him in the semidarkness here, and he hoped Judy Greene hadn't seen her come in.

"I love to look at the river at night," Cherry was saying. "How far have we come, Captain?"

"Passed Arrow Island," Kirby told her, knowing that it didn't mean anything to her. There were a hundred islands to pass, a thousand landmarks along the Big Muddy, and a woman didn't know or couldn't remember three of them. Judy Greene could, though. She was a licensed pilot on the Mississippi, undoubtedly the only woman pilot on the river. Of course, every upper Missouri pilot thought that the wide Mississippi could be run blindfold, but still it was an accomplishment for a woman.

He wondered what she was doing now. He'd seen her brother, Brandon, playing cards in the saloon with a number of other passengers before he came up, but Judy had disappeared.

Cherry Mallote said, "Do you intend to spend the winter in St. Louis, Captain?"

"Most upper river men winter there."

"You'd find New Orleans more interesting," Cherry murmured. "You have been there?"

"Many times," Kirby told her. "Too hot for me."

Cherry laughed softly. "You northern men," she chuckled. She came a step closer and Kirby Trent glanced down at her. It was dark in the pilothouse, but the moonlight fell across her face and her hair. Her dark eyes were luminous, the invitation in them.

He said almost gruffly, "And what do you know about northern men, ma'am?"

Cherry laughed again, a soft, tinkling laugh. She

slipped her arm through his, and she stood next to him as he gripped the big wheel.

Kirby stared at the river, and then he glanced down at her again. She was a beautiful woman. He'd known that for a long time, even though he knew at the same time that she wasn't worth too much, but the night was long, and he'd stood in this lonely pilothouse too many hours at night with only the river to keep him company, and sometimes it wasn't enough.

"What are you thinking of, Captain?" Cherry asked him gently.

"Many things." Kirby scowled. He felt the pressure of her fingers on his arm, and then suddenly his right arm left the wheel and moved around her waist. He drew her close, and he heard her low whisper:

"Captain!"

The river was wide and clean ahead of him here, and he knew where he was going as far as the river was concerned. Even as he bent his head to kiss her, in the back of his mind still ran the river jargon, a page from his logbook:

"Cheyenne Bluffs on the right. Another two miles or so to Rock Point, and then a square crossing to the old Thomason woodyard."

It was wrong and unnatural to be thinking of river landmarks as a man kissed a woman, but Kirby Trent was doing that. He felt her lips respond, and he heard her murmur, and then he heard another sound in the doorway behind him.

Lifting his head suddenly, he saw Judy Greene framed in a patch of moonlight. He could not see her face, the moonlight reaching only to her waist, but he could see her hands at her sides, tense.

Then she was gone, and he heard her steps on the deck outside. His arm fell from Cherry Mallote's waist and he released her. He put both hands back on the tiller wheel,

and he said tersely, sick inside, "Bad stretch of river ahead, ma'am. You'll pardon me."

"For the time being," Cherry whispered.

Kirby stood there, staring straight ahead of him, watching the shadows on the river. Judy Greene had been coming up to see him tonight. Maybe she'd been lonesome, too, and she wanted someone to talk to. It was the first time she'd come to him, and she'd found him with a dance-hall woman.

He wanted to get rid of her now, and it was an embarrassing moment. He had to see Judy, to talk to her, to explain that he'd been a fool, and that he'd forgotten himself. He'd cheapened himself in her eyes.

Reaching up with his hand, he yanked on the bell cord several times, and he could hear the faint tinkle down in the engine room. It was a special signal for Fred Johnson to come up for a moment. He could have spoken to Johnson through the speaking tube, but instead he rang the bells.

Cherry said curiously, "What was that for, Captain?"

"Engineer," Kirby told her.

In a few moments Johnson stepped in. He glanced at Cherry as he came up on Kirby's other side. He said, "You rang, sir?"

Kirby moistened his lips. "How is the wood holding out, Fred?" he asked.

The engineer blinked. Down below on the main deck they could both see one of the woodpiles. Kirby knew, and Johnson knew, that they had enough wood to last them another hundred and fifty miles down the river.

"Well supplied," Johnson murmured.

"Any hardwood on board?" Kirby asked him.

"Some ash," Johnson said. "A little oak, but mostly cottonwood."

"That number two boiler cleaned out thoroughly while we were in Steamboat Bend?" Kirby asked him.

Fred Johnson got the point, then, and he started to talk as Miss Mallote stepped to one of the other windows to look out. The engineer had a low, monotonous voice. He explained in detail how the engines were working, giving Kirby the steam pressure and other technical information, going on and on.

After about five minutes Cherry Mallote left, and Johnson stopped talking. He said blandly, "Anything else, Captain?"

"Remind me to put a lock on that door when we reach St. Louis," Kirby growled.

Johnson said softly, "Not too many men on the upper river would try to keep Cherry Mallote out, Captain."

Kirby bit his lips, remembering that he hadn't tried too hard, either. He said, "All right, Fred."

"Want me to come here, too," Johnson asked, "if Miss Greene steps in?"

Kirby gripped the tiller wheel. "Listen for your bells, Fred," he growled.

When Johnson went out, Kirby ran the river mechanically, not even thinking about it. Ahead of him there was a shadow on the river, and that was Rock Point. He swung away from the point, keeping the bow of the River Queen lined on a star in the Big Dipper. He wondered what Judy was thinking about now.

He kept the River Queen bowling down the river until one in the morning, and then he pulled into Cold Spring cove for a landing. Jonas Flynn sent out a half-dozen sentinels after the boat had been snubbed to the bank. Kirby saw Yellowstone Sam crossing the plank, rifle under his arm, and then he stepped from the pilothouse.

All was quiet now. Down on the main deck the passengers were sprawled in their blankets, filling almost every available space. Kirby went down the stairs to the texas. He was reaching in his coat pocket for a cigar, approaching the awning that was stretched across one

section of the deck, when he saw a movement in one of the chairs. The light evening breeze lifted a flap of the awning, letting the moonlight in, and he saw Judy Greene in the chair there.

Letting the cigar fall back into his pocket, he ducked under the awning and he pulled up a chair next to her. He scarcely knew how to begin this conversation, and there was an awkward pause. He said finally, "Figured you'd be sleeping by this time, Miss Greene."

"I'm not," Judy told him coldly.

"Did—did you want to see me about anything?" Kirby asked her.

"I've forgotten what it was," Judy said tersely. "It couldn't have been important."

Kirby rubbed his hands together. "I sent her out right after you left," he said gruffly. "I'm sorry about that, Miss Greene."

"Why should you be sorry?" Judy snapped. "You're a single man, and you're not the first man to kiss Miss Mallote, are you?"

Kirby scowled in the shadows here. She wasn't making it any easier for him, and he felt himself getting desperate. He said grimly, "I'm still sorry it happened."

"Maybe," Judy Greene said maliciously, "you're sorry I came in at the wrong moment. I'm sorry, too."

He was angry now, and he grasped her by the shoulders, turning her around so that she faced him. He said roughly, "Stop talking like that. I tell you Miss Mallote means nothing to me. I kissed her—"

"And maybe," Judy broke in, her voice quivering, "you'd like to kiss me, too, because I mean nothing to you. Men are always kissing girls who mean nothing to them."

She was ready to cry now. It was in her voice. She started to get up from the chair, but Kirby was holding her, and she couldn't move. She half-sobbed, "Let me go."

Instead, Kirby pulled her forward roughly and kissed her. She tried to tear herself away, but he held her tightly, and for one small moment he thought she was going to respond. Then when she started to struggle again, he released her.

She ducked under the awning, and he could hear her running along the deck to her cabin. He sat there for some time under the awning, knowing that sleep would not come to him tonight.

After a while Yellowstone Sam McGee came on board and saw him sitting on the guardrail on the texas, smoking a stub of a cigar. The guide came up the steps and slid into a chair nearby. He said when Kirby looked down at him, "Quiet as hell all around, Captain. All's well."

Kirby tossed the cigar into the river. "Like hell it is," he growled.

Chapter Eleven

In the morning he met Judy at the breakfast table, but she didn't look at him. George Stainright was up in the pilothouse, and the River Queen was making good time downriver. Cherry Mallote, who was a late riser, was not with them, and Jonas Flynn had eaten earlier with Tom Shannon.

It was a rather gloomy breakfast, Judy saying practically nothing, keeping her eyes on her plate. Brandon Greene was as cheery as usual, telling them of the card game he'd had the previous evening with some of the passengers below.

As they were leaving the saloon later in the morning, Kirby had his first opportunity to say a word to Judy alone. Brandon had stepped aside to chat with another passenger who'd come in, and for a moment they were alone. He said quietly, "Reckon I'm sorry about last night, Miss Greene. It won't happen again."

Judy nodded. She was very quiet. She said, "We'll forget about it, Captain."

Kirby went up to the pilothouse to relieve George Stainright, and he felt a little better as he stood behind the wheel. It was another clear, warm day with the sun swinging up high above the hills to the east. White clouds drifted across the sky, throwing shadows on the river.

At ten o'clock in the morning Kirby nosed the River Queen into the bank off Assiniboine Point, and Yellowstone Sam McGee stepped ashore, disappearing into the dense brush along the river's edge.

Again they were making one of these wide detours where the Big Muddy rolled due east for a dozen miles,

swerved, and then came back toward the west, leaving a neck of land five or six miles wide. On these bends a man walking could make much better time than a river boat.

At high noon, spotting a clump of driftwood piled up on a beach along the west bank, Kirby sounded his landing bells and turned in toward the bank. Practically the entire passenger list went ashore, some of them to help load the firewood, others to range along the banks, glad for the opportunity of quitting the boat for an hour.

The driftwood was hauled aboard, and the crew went to work chopping it up, piling it up on the rapidly diminishing woodpiles. This far up the river there weren't too many wood hawks, and most river pilots kept their eyes open for driftwood accumulations.

When the River Queen backed away from the shore Stainright was again at the wheel and Kirby went down for the noon meal. Yellowstone Sam had come aboard with another deer he'd shot, and in answer to Kirby's searching look he shook his head, indicating that he'd seen nothing.

"Some Indian sign," he told Kirby later, "but they ain't botherin' us. Reckon the Sioux know how many passengers go down on this last boat, an' besides, we give 'em a bellyful on the way up here."

"Keep your eyes open, Sam," Kirby said.

"Allus have," Sam McGee observed, "else I wouldn't have any hair, Captain."

Kirby saw Cherry Mallote come on deck during the early afternoon while Stainright was up in the pilothouse. She took a seat under the canvas awning on the bow of the texas, and she seemed to be watching the river with more than her usual interest, even though there were a number of men gathered around her.

On the lower deck Brandon Greene was again involved in a card game with some of the miners, and there were dozens of other card games going on all over the boat.

A fight broke out at three o'clock in the afternoon. Several of the miners, having brought along liquid refreshments, were finishing up the bottles this afternoon.

Kirby was in the engine room, talking with Fred Johnson, when he heard the commotion up in the bow on the main deck. One man had a knife in his hand, and the other a heavy chunk of firewood he'd snatched up from the nearby woodpile. They were circling each other warily with the crowd watching tensely, glad for this little diversion from the monotony of the trip.

Jonas Flynn, up on the texas, and Kirby headed for the fight at the same time, but Flynn was having trouble getting through the mob on the main stairway. A rush had been made for the bow, and the staircase was crowded with yelling men.

Kirby swung up past the after woodpile, picking up a good-sized chunk of wood as he went by. He lunged through the crowd just as the two men closed. He saw the knife flash in the sunlight, and up on the texas Cherry Mallote screamed.

Breaking in between the two fighters, Kirby grasped the knife hand of the man with the weapon, twisted it, and then threw his shoulder into the man's chest, driving him backward against one of the capstans. As the drunken miner's back hit the capstan, Brandon Greene, who was standing nearby, grasped him by the back of the collar and held him there while Kirby wrested the knife from his hand and threw it into the river.

The second fighter, a short, squat, black-bearded man, lurched forward with his cordwood in his hand, eyes red with drink, staggering a little as he came up. Kirby batted the club from his hand with his own stick of wood, and then smashed his fist to the man's jaw, dropping him unconscious to the deck.

Jonas Flynn came up, cursing, breathing hard. Kirby

said to him, "Cool this man off with a bucket of water, Jonas. If he gives you any trouble, lock him up in the hold."

"Aye, sir," Flynn growled.

Kirby nodded his thanks to the smiling Brandon Greene, and then he went up to the pilothouse to relieve George Stainright at the wheel.

Stainright said as he stepped aside, "Too many men, too little to do down there, Captain."

"Glad when we have them in St. Louis," Kirby said. "I don't relish an overloaded boat."

When Stainright went below, he settled himself behind the wheel, noticing that the passengers had quieted down again, most of them going back to their card games.

At four-thirty in the afternoon Kirby pulled in again to the right bank to pick up more driftwood, and there was the usual rush to go ashore. Because of the heat a number of men clambered over the bow and dropped into the shallow water, which was about hip-high, wading in toward the shore.

Kirby didn't like it, and he was leaning forward to shout the warning that the current was deceptively swift at this point, when one of the men lost his balance or stepped into a pothole. He went down, and the current caught him and swept him along.

Jonas Flynn and some of the crew who were already ashore snatched up boat hooks and raced down along the bank to fish him in. Although the passenger was still in quite shallow water, he was having extreme difficulty righting himself, and Kirby couldn't understand that.

Fortunately, Flynn reached him with the boat hook as he floundered a half-dozen yards offshore, but the man was nearly drowned when they brought him in to the bank. They were able to revive him, but it had been an exceedingly close call with death.

Flynn explained it to Kirby up in the pilothouse thir-

ty minutes later, when they were backing away from the bank.

"Damn fool was loaded down with gold in a money belt around his waist. Weighed him down so that when he fell he couldn't right himself. Most of 'em don't trust the boat safe, Kirby, so it serves 'em right."

Kirby nodded. Although quite a few of the miners had deposited their hard-earned gold dust in the boat safe, most of the others carried theirs in money belts and pouches around the waist, not because of the small interest charge Tom Shannon made them pay, but because they considered it safer.

A few minutes after Flynn had left the pilothouse, Kirby spotted the thin column of smoke rising into the air many miles down the river. It was impossible to tell from this point whether the fire was on the east or the west bank.

Sam McGee had spotted the smoke the instant Kirby did, and he came up into the pilothouse and stood beside the wheel, staring at it.

"Should come up to it in an hour," Kirby told him. "What do you make of it, Sam?"

The trapper shook his head. "Been lookin' fer other smoke columns," he stated. "Injun signals. But there ain't any others."

"Then it's not an Indian fire," Kirby answered.

"Damn if I know what it is." Sam McGee scowled, and it was plain to Kirby that whatever it was, McGee didn't like it.

They both stared at that column of white smoke lifting into the still air.

"Could be just a campfire along the river," Kirby said. "A lone Indian hunter, or a trapper like yourself heading south."

"Ain't a trapper in the territory," Sam McGee said disdainfully, "would make a fire like that, Captain. Not

in Injun territory. Mountain man would make his fire after dark down in some hole where it couldn't be seen. If he had to make it in the daytime, he'd use pretty damn dry wood so's it wouldn't smoke like that. Reckon that fire was made to be seen, Captain."

"By whom?" Kirby Trent asked him.

Yellowstone Sam shrugged. "Far as I kin see," he said, "ain't nobody lookin' at it but us." He spat and then he said, "Wouldn't go near it if I was you, Captain. Too many men on this river lost their hair 'cause they was curious."

"Could be an Indian trap," Kirby said.

"Could be a lot o' things," McGee said. He went below to take up his position on one of the guardrails in the bow.

Jonas Flynn had noticed the smoke column, too, and he stared up at Kirby from the texas deck as he was about to go below. Kirby shrugged his shoulders to indicate that he'd seen it, but couldn't make anything of it.

It was about five o'clock in the afternoon now, with some of the heat going out of the sun. They were still a half-dozen miles above the smoke signal when Kirby heard the light step behind him, and then Cherry Mallote's soft voice:

"Good afternoon, Captain."

He hadn't seen Miss Mallote leave her chair under the awning, and he'd thought she was still there. Evidently she'd returned to her cabin, and then come up the flight of steps to the rear of the pilothouse.

"Enjoying the trip, Miss Mallote?" Kirby asked, wishing she'd go. He was still watching that smoke column, trying to ascertain where it was coming from now. A mile below them was Pig Island, and then Tomahawk Point. Beyond Tomahawk Point was Dead Man's Cove, and every upper river man knew of the cove and the strange story connected with it.

In the early days of Missouri steamboating, a packet had nosed into the cove, searching for a place to tie up for the night. The river was not too well known then, and the cove had never been investigated. From center river it looked like an ideal spot to tie up. There were high, protective walls of reddish sandstone around the cove, running straight down into the water, which meant that there was deep water in the cove.

The captain of the packet assumed that he would find someplace inside the cove where he could tie his ropes, but when he'd edged in cautiously, he discovered that there were no breaks in the line of cliffs. The precipitous slopes ran straight up from the water's edge all around the inlet, and when he sounded he didn't touch bottom until his lines were sixty feet down.

As he backed out of the cove again, one of his boilers had blown. The fire spread rapidly and the packet drifted back into the cove. The flames eventually drove every man overboard, and as half of the crew and passenger list of seventy-five couldn't swim, they drowned like rats trying to climb up the cliff walls. Because it was a long swim out of the cove and around to the other bank, many others had perished, also. The accident had given the cove its name, and river pilots avoided it from that day on.

It seemed to Kirby Trent, watching the smoke signal, that it was coming from the cliffs above the cove. He could not be sure, though. He heard Cherry Mallote saying curiously:

"Is that a campfire down the river, Captain?"

"We've been watching it," Kirby told her briefly.

"Could it be Indians?" Miss Mallote asked in a hushed voice. She was standing slightly behind Kirby and to his right.

"It's possible," Kirby said. "We're not going in to investigate."

They were swinging past Pig Island, a tiny, tree-covered

island out in the middle of the river with plenty of water on either side. Kirby took the right passage. As they swung around the island he could see Tomahawk Point jutting out into the water another mile down the river. Dead Man's Cove was around the point on the left bank. Already he could see the high red cliffs beyond the point. The column of smoke was ascending from the top of the cliffs.

He stayed out in center river as they approached the point, which was a mile or so above the cove. He could see the cliffs very clearly now, and the smoke column ascending, but they were too far distant to see the actual fire or figures about it.

Cherry Mallote said, "Aren't you going in closer, Captain? That signal might be a white man asking you to pick him up."

"If he wanted to be picked up," Kirby answered dryly, "the last place he'd wait would be on top of those cliffs. This boat can do many things, but it can't climb."

The River Queen was within five hundred yards of the cove now, out in center river. Kirby kept it there, but he watched the smoke signal. Jonas Flynn and Yellowstone Sam were watching, too. Flynn had a pair of field glasses on the cliff tops, but Kirby could see now that the fire was burning beyond the cliffs and only the smoke could be seen ascending.

Cherry Mallote said, "I still would like to see who's making that fire, Captain."

Kirby grinned coldly. "Go below," he said. "Tell Mr. Flynn you want to borrow the trawler to go ashore. But you'll have to go alone into that cove. None of us are going."

"On the contrary," Miss Mallote told him softly, "I think all of us are going."

Kirby felt something hard and cold jammed into the small of his back. At the same time Cherry Mallote

reached up and yanked three times on the bell cord, the signal for landing.

Immediately the River Queen slackened speed. Cherry had stepped back again and she was standing directly behind Kirby now as he gripped the wheel, his face expressionless.

He said quietly, "Is that a gun in your hand, Miss Mallote?"

"You know it's a gun," Cherry laughed grimly. "Now turn this boat into the cove."

Down below Jonas Flynn was staring up at the pilothouse, having heard the landing bells and felt the slackening speed of the boat.

Kirby said gently, "You seem to know a lot about river boats, Miss Mallote. How did you know three bells meant a landing?"

"Glatz told me," Cherry Mallote snapped. "He told me a lot of things I'd have to know if you refused to co-operate, and I—I had to shoot you. For instance, I know that we have enough drift now to take us into the cove aided by the current if I do the steering, and I can do the steering."

"Phin Glatz?" Kirby murmured. "There's a model for a pilot."

"You going to turn it in?" Miss Mallote asked slowly. She'd stepped back now, taking the gun from Kirby's back.

He turned his head slightly to look at her. She held a black derringer in her right hand, and the gun was very steady. Her dark eyes were hard, almost savage, and Kirby Trent knew what she was thinking about; he knew the stakes she was after. He knew she'd kill him and then guide the River Queen into the cove anyway.

He said softly, "A woman's always bad luck on a Missouri River boat anyway, Miss Mallote."

He spun the tiller wheel, put one boot against the

spoke to hold it in place, and let her veer in toward the cove. The movement drew an immediate response from Jonas Flynn.

Flynn handed his field glasses to Sam McGee, and then ran for the steps that led up to the pilothouse.

Cherry Mallote said harshly, "Tell that redheaded fool to stay below or I'll shoot you and I'll put a bullet through him, too. He's unarmed."

Neither Kirby nor Jonas Flynn carried weapons while on board the boat, never thinking that they would be needed in a hurry. Flynn was halfway up the steps when Kirby's voice reached him.

"Stay below, Jonas," Kirby said evenly.

The redhead stopped, stared up at Kirby curiously, and then started to descend again. When he was back on the texas he called up, "We heading into that cove, Captain?"

"That's right," Kirby said.

Other people were looking up at them now, conscious of the fact that something was wrong. Brandon Greene was down on the texas with his sister, asking questions, looking toward the cove and then up at the pilothouse. He was smoking a cigar.

Tom Shannon had come out of his cabin and was consulting with Jonas Flynn as the River Queen headed steadily in toward those red walls. Dead Man's Cove was less than fifty yards wide and a hundred or so deep. Kirby reached up and rang another bell. The big paddle wheel was suspended in the air now, river water dripping from the buckets. The packet drifted slowly into the cove.

Kirby said casually, "No place to tie up in there, Miss Mallote, or did you know that?"

"There'll be ropes tossed to you from the cliffs," Cherry stated coldly. "Just left it drift in slowly."

"Who are we meeting besides Glatz?" Kirby asked. "He's not the head man of this thing."

"You'll find out soon enough," Cherry told him. "Order your crew to catch the ropes when they're thrown."

Kirby watched the walls coming closer and closer. They were into the cove now, surrounded by those sixty-foot cliffs, and it had suddenly become stifling hot. There was no breeze inside the cove, the cliff walls blocking it out. They were a reddish brown in color, streaked with veins of quartz, rising straight up from the water's edge, utterly impossible to climb.

As they came into the cove, Kirby could see figures moving along the tops of the cliffs. He knew what they were here for, but he did not know yet how they intended to consummate this stupendous burglary.

Several men with long ropes were waiting on the cliff walls, ready to cast them aboard the River Queen when it drifted in close enough. Down below on the texas the bewildered Jonas Flynn was staring at this activity, and then at Kirby in the pilothouse. For the moment Kirby felt sorry for the man.

He started to weigh his chances if he were suddenly to sound his bells and have Fred Johnson reverse the paddle wheel, which would send them out of the cove and into center river again. Even if Cherry Mallote shot him then, they would be moving to safety. Flynn and others of the crew would know there was foul play in the pilothouse and keep the paddle wheel in reverse until they were out of the cove.

Kirby's eyes shifted to the bell cord, and then he heard Miss Mallote's hard, brittle laugh, a triumphant laugh. She said softly, as if reading his mind, "Too late, Captain. It won't work now."

Then he saw the cannon. There were four of them—twelve pounders, he figured—rolled up to the edge of the cliff, their wicked black nozzles pointed down at the River Queen.

Cherry Mallote said tersely, "They're aimed to strike

you below the waterline on both sides, Captain. If you try to back this boat out of the cove they'll smash your hull to pieces. You'll go down in ten minutes, and probably more than half of this crowd can't swim."

Kirby stared up at the guns, feeling a little sick now, realizing he should have made his play earlier if he intended to make one at all. He said. "You've taken great pains, Miss Mallote, you and your associates."

"We've been planning this all summer," Cherry said.

"Sharp Granville?" Kirby asked, and he didn't need an answer. He saw the slender shape of the gambling-house owner up on the cliff wall next to one of the guns. Granville was watching them intently as they drifted in foot by foot closer to the cliff wall.

Kirby thought grimly, A dying man can take chances.

Granville called down sharply, "Catch these ropes when they're thrown."

Jonas Flynn had seen the cannon, too, and Kirby saw his face go pale. He looked up at Kirby haggardly.

Kirby called down calmly, "Do what he says, Jonas."

He had the terrible feeling now that in a way he'd betrayed his crew, his passengers, and his boat, but it was too late to do anything about it now. Those four cannon could start belching death and destruction in a matter of seconds. The odds were that at least half of his passengers could not swim, and many of the others would not be able to make it out of the cove and to the safety of the shore if the River Queen went down in this deep water.

Two ropes suddenly coiled down from the clifftop, landing on the deck. Jonas Flynn reluctantly ordered several of his crew to pick them up and wrap them around the capstans.

Something else came down then, and Kirby was beginning to get an inkling as to how Granville intended to pull off this coup. He didn't have more than thirty or forty men up on the cliff with him, and there were at least

two hundred and seventy-five, including the crew, on board the River Queen.

The object that followed the ropes was a long rope ladder that descended from the clifftop to the main deck. The River Queen was nosing gently against the cliff wall now, her bow pointed in, the cannon commanding her sides.

Kirby said laconically, "You didn't forget anything, Miss Mallote." He spotted Phin Glatz up near the cannon with Sharp Granville, and he knew now why Glatz had stolen George Stainright's logbook. Glatz had been hired to take the stolen River Queen downriver, and because he hadn't done any piloting since he'd lost his license, he had to know the condition of the river before he could attempt it. Many of the sand bars and shoals had moved since Glatz last handled a boat. Their new positions were recorded in Stainright's logbook, along with other pertinent information he would need.

Sharp Granville was calling down to Kirby Trent now. The pilothouse of the River Queen came to within thirty feet of the clifftop and he could see Granville clearly. Granville said tersely, "Order your crew to come up that ladder one at a time, Captain, and without any weapons on them. The man found with a gun on his person will be shot. You will come first, Captain. The passengers will follow the crew. Is that clear?"

Kirby looked at him. "This is piracy, Granville," he said. "You'll be hanged for this."

Sharp Granville waved an impatient hand at him. "Come up that ladder, Captain," he snapped, "and give your orders to the crew and the passengers."

Kirby knew that he'd had that part of it figured out, too. As the passengers came up the rope ladder one at a time, they were to be divested of their gold. Disarmed, they would be kept at a distance until the boat was cleared.

Granville's crew, with Phin Glatz as the pilot, would then take the River Queen downriver, probably scuttling her when they neared St. Louis. He, Kirby Trent, his crew, and the passengers would have to make their way as best they could back to Steamboat Bend and wait for the first steamer up the following spring. Without provisions, a mob of men like this could never hope to make it back to civilization, and those who tried would have to brave the rigors of approaching winter and Indian attacks. It would give Sharp Granville and his crew of Steamboat Bend cutthroats plenty of time to split up the haul and separate.

Kirby had one more question for Cherry Mallote. He said curiously, "The combine isn't behind this, is it?"

Miss Mallote laughed coldly. She said, "The combine probably consists of honest gentlemen compared to the crew we've lined up here. Ready to go, Captain?"

"I don't seem to have much choice," Kirby said.

He walked past the singer, stepping out through the door. Cherry Mallote followed him, the gun still trained on his back. Down on the texas and below on the main deck the passengers and the crew watched him, silent, grim-faced, knowing what was going on. They'd seen the cannon up above them, and they knew how deep that water was. They'd heard Sharp Granville's words.

Kirby paused beside Jonas Flynn. He said, "I made a mistake, Jonas. I never should have brought the boat in here."

"She had the gun on you," the mate growled, "an' you couldn't know about the cannon down here. They must have worked on this all summer."

"They did," Kirby told him. "They're making no mistakes. If we don't follow his orders he'll blow holes in the boat and more than half of the men aboard will be dead within an hour. We can't take that chance."

"No." Flynn shook his head. "I hate like hell to turn

this boat over to them, though. Here we've been worryin' about the combine, an' this bunch o' tinhorns jump us."

"Pass the word on to the crew and the passengers to come up after me," Kirby said. "I'll see if I can get Granville to leave us some supplies so that we can get back to Steamboat Bend."

He looked around as he spoke. They were all watching him. Brandon Greene was standing with his sister near the head of the stairs leading down to the main deck. There was a little smile on Brandon's face, a kind of perplexed smile. Judy was staring grimly at Cherry Mallote.

Yellowstone Sam McGee sat atop the woodpile up near the bow, his Sharps rifle in his hands and a Colt gun laid out on the wood next to him. He looked at Kirby, and then at the nearest cannon and the crew around it.

George Stainright was standing with Tom Shannon on the texas, not far from the steps that led to the pilothouse. Fred Johnson, the engineer, had come out of the engine room, face sooty as usual, and was leaning against the after woodpile, his cap on the back of his head, a half-smoked cigar in his mouth.

Again Kirby looked down at Sam McGee, knowing what was in the trapper's mind. McGee was for opening up suddenly on the gun crews around those cannon, shooting them down or driving them back before they could send too many shots into the River Queen.

A concerted effort on the part of passengers and crew might make this plan successful, but if it failed, a hundred and fifty to two hundred men would drown in Dead Man's Cove. If the River Queen sank quickly enough and the water reached the boilers, she would blow, which would mean that hardly any of them would be alive when it was over. He wasn't ready to take that chance with other men's lives.

Sharp Granville called down the clifftop, "We're waiting, Captain. Come up that ladder."

Kirby had to descend to the main deck to reach the rope ladder. He glanced back at Cherry Mallote, who was waiting a few yards behind him, the derringer still trained on his back. Then he started toward the stairs, walking past Judy Greene.

Brandon said to him softly as he went by, "Hard luck."

Kirby had turned his head slightly to look at him, and he saw Judy Greene's act very clearly. Miss Mallote was striding past her, eyes trained on the man she was guarding. She was holding her flowing white skirt with one hand, the gun in the other.

Judy deftly thrust out her right foot as Miss Mallote went past, and Cherry Mallote let out a short cry as she pitched forward on her face, barely missing Kirby as she fell. As her gun hand struck the deck, the gun bounced out of it. Judy pounced on top of her, snatching the gun. She held it to the back of Miss Mallote's head, and she stared up at Sharp Granville.

It was Yellowstone Sam McGee who fired the first shot after the moment of stunned silence that followed Judy's act. Sam McGee's Sharps rifle banged and one of the three men around the cannon facing the starboard side of the boat clutched at his chest and then pitched forward over the cliff, his body barely missing the bow of the River Queen before it struck the water.

McGee's Colt went into action a moment later as he roared, "Git them gun crews, boys! Fire at the gun crews!"

The passengers, every one of them armed, needed no more urging. Over two hundred short arms appeared as if by magic. Flurries of shots ripped up at the men around the guns.

Kirby saw Brandon Greene coolly slip his Colt gun from inside his coat and drop two of the men around one of the guns. A passenger near Kirby was holding his gun at the cliff wall, uncertain as to what he should shoot at. Kirby leaped over to him, snatched the gun from his

hands, and sent five quick shots at the crew around another gun.

Three men pitched forward over the cliff wall before one of the cannon went off, but only one cannon was fired. Up on the clifftop Sharp Granville was screaming insanely for his men to man the cannon.

Jonas Flynn roared down to the crew on the main deck to cast off the ropes. Fred Johnson had bolted for the engine room, and a matter of seconds later the big paddle wheel started to revolve in reverse as the River Queen backed out of the cove.

Kirby gave the bewildered George Stainright a push in the direction of the pilothouse steps, and then Stainright recovered himself and sprinted up the steps and into the house to take over the wheel. They moved slowly, but the four cannon on the clifftop were deserted by now.

The wildly yelling passengers were firing at every head that appeared above the top of the cliff, keeping Granville's men away from the guns.

Kirby saw Phin Glatz running around the top of the wall. Glatz was half hidden behind the rim, and he undoubtedly thought he was completely out of danger, but a half-dozen bullets struck him and he went down.

Jonas Flynn whooped, "We got 'em!"

They were half out of the cove by now, but still well within the range of the cannon up on the clifftop. Kirby saw Sharp Granville, his face distorted with rage and disappointment, run up to one of the guns. The passengers and the crew on the River Queen had been waiting for another head to appear, and this was all they needed.

It seemed to Kirby as if every gun on board was trained on Granville and most of them went off simultaneously. There was a heavy booming sound, and Granville's body seemed to leap off the ground. It fell back from the cannon, a ragged heap, literally shot to pieces.

The River Queen continued to move out of the cove, and Kirby, remembering that single cannon shot, made a dash down the stairs toward the forehatch. Flynn was already there, yanking it open. They descended into the hold together and they located the jagged hole in the hull on the starboard side. It was almost on the waterline, and some water was coming in.

"Good," Flynn exulted. "Good! We'll have this patched up in an hour."

The boat carpenter was already coming down the steps with his assistant, and Kirby left Flynn down below to direct the repairs. Up on deck he had a quick survey made. Granville's crew had done some shooting from the clifftop, and a few of the passengers were wounded, although none of them seriously. He had the wounded men put in one of the cabins after they'd been attended to by one of the miners who'd had a medical background.

Judy Greene was still guarding Cherry Mallote. Cherry was up on her feet now, her face almost ugly in the bitterness of defeat.

Kirby said to her, "You'll stand trial for this in St. Louis, Miss Mallote. In the meantime you are to be confined to your cabin with an armed guard over you."

He assigned one of the crew to take her to the cabin, and then he turned to Judy. He said quietly, "You saved my boat, Miss Greene. I don't know how to thank you."

"You tried hard enough to save mine," Judy replied, "and I couldn't see that—that she-devil make a fool of you."

"She didn't," Kirby said. "I've seen her kind up and down the river for fifteen years. I tried to get Sharp Granville to have her take passage on your boat. He could tell you that if he were alive."

"I didn't know," Judy murmured, and Kirby noticed that her eyes were softer than he'd ever seen them. They were nice eyes.

Chapter Twelve

The River Queen was out in mid-river again, heading downstream, when Jonas Flynn came up to say that the hole in the hull was being repaired and the water pumped out.

"We were lucky," Flynn chuckled. "That Miss Greene is mighty handy aboard this boat, Kirby."

"I've found that out," Kirby told him gravely. He started up the pilothouse steps to take the wheel from George Stainright, as it was still his shift. Less than thirty minutes had elapsed since they'd entered Dead Man's Cove and come out again, but they'd been thirty hectic minutes, and Kirby Trent was sure he would not want to go through them again.

Stainright said as Kirby came into the pilothouse, "Clear river ahead, Captain, and still your boat."

"It was close enough," Kirby murmured.

"Doctor back in Steamboat Bend," Stainright said, "told me Granville didn't have two years to live, anyway. Lung trouble."

"He wanted to live them high," Kirby observed.

"And he would have," Stainright said, "if it hadn't been for the little matter of Judy Greene's foot."

Kirby took over the wheel, and Stainright said to him jokingly, "Don't let anyone put a gun in your back again, Captain."

"Once is enough." Kirby smiled.

Stainright left the pilothouse and Kirby was alone again. It was about six o'clock. There was still plenty of light in the sky, but the sun was already gone behind the rim of barren hills to the west. A red glow lingered

in the sky. A cool breeze had sprung up now, and Kirby was grateful for it as he swung the River Queen around the bend known as Crow Point.

Down below on the decks the passengers were still discussing the fight avidly. Kirby lifted his speaking tube. He got Fred Johnson on the other end, and he said quietly, "That was nice work, Fred, when you started backing her out of the cove."

"Didn't want any cannonballs in my machinery," Johnson said laconically. "Glad we got away, Captain." He added, "That's a smart girl you took on board there."

"Miss Mallote?" Kirby asked, not sure as to his meaning.

"Other one," Johnson told him. "Miss Mallote's luck wasn't too good, Captain."

Kirby was smiling a little as he put the speaking tube back on the hook. He watched Brandon Greene down below, chatting with Yellowstone Sam McGee. It was the shooting of McGee and Greene that had really saved them in the early part of the fight. Their shots had unsettled the crews of three of the four guns, giving the passengers time to get their weapons into action. Kirby was remembering that this was the second time Greene had been highly instrumental in saving his boat.

He'd noticed Greene talking before with Sam McGee, and it was evident that the trapper liked this Eastern-bred university man. They were a strangely assorted pair, though. McGee being scarcely literate. McGee, who'd been up and down the river for twenty years, and who knew it nearly as well as a river pilot, was pointing out various landmarks, and Brandon Greene seemed to be taking an interest.

They were moving past Medicine Island now, with the passage on the right side and a deep wooded cove on the left. On many occasions going upriver Kirby had pulled into the Medicine Island cove for the night landing. The

cove was well-protected, with deep water for nearly half a mile.

They weren't going to stop tonight. In another hour and a half Stainright would come on for the eight-o'clock shift, and because the night promised to be clear, Kirby intended to keep going through the night, handling the wheel to four or five in the morning. He was anxious to get downriver now after this scare in Dead Man's Cove.

As they went past Medicine Island, Kirby saw Brandon Greene leave Sam McGee and come up the pilothouse steps. Many of the passengers were filing into the salon for the first shift of the evening meal.

Outside the door, Greene hesitated. He said to Kirby, "All right if I come in, Captain?"

Kirby said over his shoulder, "For a man who's helped to save my boat twice in a matter of weeks, you're a modest man, Mr. Greene. Come right in."

Brandon Greene laughed. He was smoking an expensive cigar as he stepped into the pilothouse to stand beside Kirby at the wheel. He said, "It was quite a little fight, Captain. I suppose you had no idea anyone was planning on robbing your boat?"

"Couldn't figure how they could do it with so many men on board," Kirby said. "Granville was very clever."

"And now he's very dead," Greene murmured. "That seems to be the lot of all clever men. Why it should be, I don't know." He flicked ash from his cigar and he went on smoothly, "Has that every struck you, Captain?"

Kirby shrugged. "You're in a philosophical mood, Mr. Greene."

"Watching Sharp Granville die," Greene observed, "after being so close to a vast fortune, makes a man think. Granville didn't make any mistakes, and yet he lost out."

"Evil generally loses out in the end," Kirby stated.

Brandon Greene laughed good-humoredly, and he sounded again like his normal self. He said, "You're old-

fashioned, Captain, but I admire your sentiments. I wish I could agree with you, but I've seen too many poor and honest men get the worst of it in this life. It shakes my confidence in the maxims by which you live."

"I still prefer to live by them," Kirby maintained, "even though we've all seen instances where they seemed to be false. In this world, good is good and evil is evil. If we try to live any other way we might all of us just as well put a gun to our temples and blow our brains out."

Brandon Greene was silent for a few moments as he puffed on his cigar. They were swinging around Rock Point now and heading down toward the Twins, two islands out in center river, with the channel running between them. The channel here was very narrow.

Greene said quietly, "Whatever happens in the future, Captain Trent, I want you to know that I have admired and respected you."

Kirby glanced at him. It was beginning to get dark in the pilothouse and he could not see Greene's face too clearly. He said, "Thank you, Mr. Greene."

That was when he saw the gray packet drawn up across the channel between the Twins. It was a long and low craft, a stern-wheeler, every bit of unnecessary equipment stripped from the hull. The light was not too good on the river now, and to Kirby Trent this gray packet looked like a ghost ship. It was painted a peculiar mottled gray from bow to stern, with two black smokestacks jutting into the night sky. There were no lights, but even as Kirby reached hastily for his bell cord to stop the paddle wheel, a cannon aboard the gray packet winked orange.

The dull boom followed a few moments later, and Kirby heard the ball swish by above the pilothouse. His bells rang down below in the engine room, and he heard the startled yells of the passengers. He was starting to spin the wheel rapidly in order to make a wide turn in the river when he heard Brandon Greene's soft voice.

"Better take it in to the shore, Captain," Greene said.

At the same time Kirby felt something strangely familiar nose into the small of his back for the second time this day. He stood stock-still as the River Queen started to come around out in center river, the bow lined on the left bank.

Kirby said, his voice expressionless, "Is that a gun, Mr. Greene?"

"That's a gun," Brandon said.

"And that," Kirby went on gently, nodding toward the gray packet, "is the combine police boat."

"That's right," Brandon Greene admitted. "Keep this boat pointed toward the shore, Captain. Don't try to turn and run."

"Therefore," Kirby Trent stated calmly, as if he were solving a minor mathematical problem, "this makes you a member of the combine, Mr. Greene."

"The combine," Brandon Greene told him, "was conceived in a cheap little St. Louis hotel room. I had one dollar in my pockets at the time, and I'd discovered that with all my education I was not as valuable as the most illiterate roustabout on the water front. I might say that I was alone when the plan was conceived, and I must take full credit for it."

There was that little pride in his voice again, tinged with regret. He stood behind Kirby, holding the gun firmly against his back, a cool, calculating man.

"You began with a few small ship owners," Kirby said as if reminiscing, "men who weren't making out very well anyway. You made them rich promises, and then you pretended to others that you were much bigger and much stronger than you actually were. You drew more boats into the net, and then you were strong. You could use force."

"We had to use some little force," Brandon Greene admitted, "because there are men like yourself, Captain

Trent, to whom profit is not god. You can understand that the combine could never be successful as long as there were free boats on the river."

"You have burned some boats," Kirby accused him coldly. "You've used force on other boats." He paused and then he said slowly, "Did you even burn your sister's boat?"

There was some reproach in Brandon Greene's voice as he spoke. He said, "That was undoubtedly Granville's work, Captain. He wanted more passengers on board the boat he was holding up. He didn't want that gold split."

Down below on the texas deck Jonas Flynn was staring at the gray packet, and then up at the pilothouse. The passengers were jammed on the starboard side of the boat, watching too, wondering.

Kirby knew what Flynn was thinking. He was swinging his boat around in the river to make a run for it. They could not hope to fight this gray packet, which had cannon aboard, but they could run. Flynn thought he was starting his run.

Brandon Greene said, "Sound your landing bells, Captain."

Kirby pursed his lips. "What are your plans for my boat, Mr. Greene?"

"We shall discuss that after you're tied to the bank," Greene said.

Kirby didn't need to be told. With the River Queen's passengers ashore, Greene could sink her with a few well-placed shots from his cannon.

"You'll never get away with this," Kirby told him quietly. "There's no law this far up the river yet, but there will be. It'll catch up with you."

"I know," Brandon Greene murmured. "The law of good and evil caught up with Sharp Granville. It'll catch up with me, but I'm committed to this, Captain, and there's no turning around, just as there is no turning

around for your boat now." His voice was brittle. He said, "Will you sound your landing bells, Captain?"

Again Kirby Trent hesitated. He'd made one mistake this day when he'd permitted Cherry Mallote to force him into Dead Man's Cove. He didn't want to make another mistake if there were the slightest possibility of escaping from the trap Greene had set for him.

The gray packet had steam up. He could see the thin streamers of white smoke lifting from her stacks. She was ready to dart away from the channel between the Twins and make pursuit, and she would catch up with him, too, if he tried to run. If he ran the River Queen into a cove along the shore, a cove like the one to the left of Medicine Island, he might be able to make a fight for it. It would be rifles against cannon, but the gray packet wouldn't be able to do any maneuvering in the cove. She'd have to come in head on.

Brandon Greene said slowly, "I've come a long way, Captain, and I'm not stopping now. Will you ring your bells, please?"

Judy Greene said from the darkened doorway behind them, "Turn your boat about, Captain, if you want to make a run for it."

Kirby heard Brandon Greene's sharp intake of breath. The muzzle of the gun left his back, and then he heard Judy Greene's step on the floor. She came up on his left, and when he turned his head slightly he saw the gun in her hand. Her face was in the shadows and he could not see it clearly. Her voice was tense with emotion.

"Turn it about if you wish, Captain," she said.

Kirby knew that she'd been outside that door long enough to hear everything, and she was siding with him.

Brandon said slowly, "If you don't sound those bells, Captain, I shall be obliged to shoot you."

"And I will shoot you, Brandon," Judy told him simply. "You are not going to destroy this boat."

They were getting dangerously close to the shore now, although moving at half speed. If he didn't make the turn now, Kirby knew they could never do it later. He swung the tiller sharply, holding one boot against the spoke on the floor.

The River Queen careened suddenly. Judy Greene, who'd been raised on the river, had braced herself instinctively. Kirby was steady at the wheel. But Brandon Greene, who'd been standing a few feet back from Kirby now, unsupported in any way, lurched forward against the open window sill to the right of the tiller wheel.

As his body struck the pilothouse frame, Kirby lashed out with one hand, striking the gun from Brandon Greene's limp fingers. As it fell to the floor, he bent down and picked it up, holding the tiller wheel with his boot.

Brandon Greene stepped back into the deep shadows of the pilothouse, a tall figure in the darkness there. He said nothing. Kirby glanced at him as the River Queen came around in the river. He heard another loud boom from the gray packet, and a second shot whizzed past the pilothouse, this time closer.

Kirby said to the girl, "Obliged, Miss Greene."

Judy didn't say anything. She still stood to his left, with her brother off to the right. They were looking at each other across the few yards of intervening space, neither of them able to see the other's face, but still looking.

Kirby Trent felt it, too. They'd been close, very close, and now it was over. There were no words to say. For one moment Kirby was almost sorry she'd come in.

They were heading upstream again now, and Kirby swung in toward the bank to get out of the current. Medicine Island was less than three miles upriver, and he was positive that he could make it before the gray packet could come close enough to them to do damage.

Kirby said to the girl, "We're going into the cove alongside Medicine Island, Miss Greene. We can't race that

boat, but if we get in there we will be safe for a while."

She didn't say anything. He doubted if she'd even heard the words. She was still looking across at her brother.

Again the cannon from the gray packet boomed, but the ball fell short this time. Kirby had already sounded his bells for full speed, and the River Queen was quivering as she drove into the current.

Jonas Flynn was streaking up the steps from the texas deck, and there was a babble of sound from the passengers jammed below.

Brandon Greene spoke for the first time to his sister. He said quietly, "You had too high an opinion of me, Judy. I'm sorry for that."

"For nothing else, Brandon?" Judy asked him slowly.

"Only a fool," Brandon Greene murmured, "is sorry for the life he's led. I have never been a fool, although I've been many other things."

Jonas Flynn came into the pilothouse then. He didn't see the gun in Judy's hand at first, and he said excitedly, "She's coming after us, Kirby. Think you can outrun her?"

"Nothing can outrun her," Brandon told them without emotion. "She's the fastest packet afloat. I designed her myself."

Flynn gulped. He looked at Kirby and then at Greene in the shadows. He said, "Did you, Mr. Greene?"

Kirby handed Flynn the gun he'd stuck in his waistband. He said slowly, "Mr. Greene is head of the combine, Jonas. Take him below and lock him in the hold."

The mate took the gun from Kirby's hand. His voice was unsteady as he spoke. He said, "You better come with me, Mr. Greene."

"We're heading for the Medicine Island cove," Kirby said over his shoulder. "Send Stainright up here, Jonas."

"Aye, sir." Jonas Flynn stood by the door waiting for Brandon Greene to pass out ahead of him.

Kirby heard Greene's steps across the floor, and then they stopped behind him.

Greene said, "I'm sorry this is happening to you, Captain, but I had little choice when you turned down my offers."

Kirby shrugged. "The way the cards run," he stated. "I'm obliged for your help, Mr. Greene."

Greene went out, Flynn following him. Kirby saw them going down the pilothouse stairs. They were swinging around Rock Point again, headed up toward Medicine Island.

Kirby said to the silent girl at his side, "This is hard on you, Miss Greene."

"What will happen to him," Judy asked slowly, "if we ever get downriver, Captain?"

"He'll have to stand trial for attempted piracy at least," Kirby said. "It might be hard to prove he had anything to do with the other ships that have been burned by the combine. He's been very clever thus far by staying in the background."

"How much chance have you of getting back?" Judy wanted to know.

Kirby smiled ruefully. "The chances are thin."

George Stainright came into the pilothouse. He said, "You wanted to see me, Captain?"

Kirby nodded. "We're running from the combine boat," he said, "and I'm heading for the Medicine Island cove. You know it?"

"Pretty well," Stainright said.

"There was a sand bar at about the entrance to the cove the last time I went in. A boat could get past if the bar hasn't moved. What do you know about it?"

"Hasn't moved," Stainright told him slowly, "but she's built up considerably since the last time I pulled in there, Captain. Joe Griswold of the Eclipse told me he was afraid to go in last fall."

Kirby scowled. "Didn't know that," he admitted. "No other place we can pull in, though. If we get over the bar there's deep water in the cove, and it's narrow."

"That's true."

Below on the main deck and aft they heard quick shouts and then a shot. A minute later Flynn came into the pilothouse. Up ahead Kirby could make out the dim bulk of Medicine Island.

The mate said slowly, "Lost our prisoner, Captain. He went over the side. I—I took a shot at him."

Kirby knew from the way he spoke that he hadn't aimed too carefully.

"Gray packet picking him up?" Kirby said.

"They put a boat down for him," Flynn said. "That'll give us a little more time to get into the cove, Captain."

Kirby glanced at Judy Greene. "Might be better this way," he murmured.

She didn't say anything; she was crying.

He said to George Stainright, "You'd better see Miss Greene to her cabin. She's not well."

When they were gone Kirby said to the mate, "There's a sandbar across the mouth of that cove at Medicine Island. Stainright think's we'll have trouble getting over."

"And what in hell happens when we get in?" Flynn muttered.

"All we'll have," Kirby said, "is a breathing spell. If we keep running now, the packet will come alongside and put a few balls through us. I'll have to make for the shore anyway and we'll go down."

Flynn nodded gloomily. "Reckon we jumped from the fryin' pan right into the fire, Captain. Funny thing about Brandon Greene. I had him figured as a square shooter."

"Maybe he is," Kirby observed, "in his own way. I'd say he had a pretty hard time of it when he was trying to get started in life. He had his pride, too, and it made him bitter. Now he's taken the bull by the horns."

He swung the River Queen in toward the right of Medicine Island, sounding his bells for half speed. He would have liked very much to be able to send out the trawler with the linesmen to sound the bottom as they came up on the bar, but that was out of the question. They had to get inside as quickly as possible with the gray packet coming up on them.

From the river the cove was not discernible at night. The island and the mainland seemed to blend in one long line of treetops, but Kirby kept the River Queen's nose pinned on the tallest tree in the line. He'd been in this cove three years before and he'd steered by that tree. He hadn't forgotten it.

They came in slowly, with Jonas Flynn stepping outside the pilothouse now and then to look back at the gray packet. He said, "We have more than three-quarters of a mile on her, Captain. That should be enough."

"She'll come up closer," Kirby told him, "as we're edging in over the bar, but I don't think Greene will open up with that cannon now with his sister aboard."

"Reckon all we have to do, then," Flynn observed, "is keep her aboard and he won't shoot that cannon."

Kirby shook his head. "In the morning," he said, "if we're still out on the river, he can come up and put a ball or two through our paddle wheel, crippling us."

They were close up on the bar now, and Kirby braced himself for the shock when they touched. He hoped against hope that Stainright had been wrong about that bar, or that it had worked its way out of the cove entrance.

George Stainright came back into the pilothouse as they edged forward. The trees seemed to be swinging around them, retreating dead ahead, and spreading out on either side.

"About here," Stainright murmured, and it was then that they touched bottom.

Kirby felt the River Queen stagger but keep going,

and that was all he needed to know. Yanking his bells for steam ahead, he gripped the wheel. Fred Johnson threw his lever into high speed again, and the boat surged forward, grinding over the bar and into deep water.

Jonas Flynn yelled, "We're in, Captain!"

The River Queen was proceeding slowly up the cove in deep water again. The cove was about forty or fifty yards wide here, once they'd got past the opening. It narrowed again later on when they were a half mile or more up along the island.

As they swung around a point on the island, Kirby sounded his landing bells.

Jonas Flynn, who was watching the gray packet intently, called from outside, "Reckon she ain't comin' through, Kirby. She's lyin' to outside the bar. Her pilot knows about that bar."

The River Queen moved slowly in toward the shore, tree branches coming out to scrape her bow as she went in. Several of the crew went over the side with ropes, and in another few minutes the River Queen was snubbed to the bank.

From this landing place they could not see the gray packet tied up on the other side of the sand bar. The two boats were at least a mile apart, but Jonas Flynn had seen the gray packet coming about as it drew near the bar.

Flynn, who had gone below to supervise the tying up, came into the pilothouse just as Kirby was stepping away from the wheel, taking a seat on the bench against the rear wall.

A match flared up in the dark room as Kirby touched up his pipe. He sat back against the wood, feeling some of the tension go out of his body. He saw Tom Shannon come into the pilothouse, and then Yellowstone Sam McGee.

"Hard luck," Shannon said simply.

McGee spat into the cuspidor. He stood by the wheel looking out through the dark trees.

Kirby said, "Any suggestions, gentlemen?"

"Put wings on her," Flynn scowled. "Fly away like a bird."

"Is there another end to this cove?" Shannon wanted to know.

"Medicine Island is separated from the mainland," Kirby explained, "by a narrow channel, but it's all rocks. We're in a dead end here."

"And the gray packet is parked right across the way out," Flynn muttered.

George Stainright, who was leaning against the wall smoking a cigar, said thoughtfully, "In three days this river will have fallen so far we won't be able to get back over that bar even with the use of our spars. Is that right, Captain?"

"I'd say you were right," Kirby nodded.

"Then all Greene has to do," Tom Shannon said, "is to sit tight where he is for a few days until the river falls. We'll be stuck here all winter, and the Sioux will do the rest."

"They do a good job on river boats, too," Jonas Flynn muttered. "Ain't a one far as I know has wintered up this far. We're right in the heart of Sioux country. That right, Sam?"

Sam McGee spat again. "Have to start hikin' it back to Steamboat Bend," he observed, "if we're stuck here, Captain. Ain't no game up this way, either, when the snow comes."

"I have a suggestion," Kirby said from the bench.

"What?" Flynn asked eagerly.

"None of us have had our supper," Kirby told them calmly. "Shall we eat, gentlemen?"

"Hell," the mate growled, "ain't even thought about food."

Kirby ushered them all out of the pilothouse and they went below, where the passengers swarmed around them with a thousand questions. One man kept yelling, "They can't stop a river boat. We'll get the government after them."

Jonas Flynn said dryly, "Ain't no government north of Yankton, mister."

Tom Shannon said quietly to Kirby as he sat down next to him at the long table, "It's pretty serious, isn't it, Kirby?"

"It's bad," Kirby admitted. "We'll have to figure something out."

"And quickly," Shannon added. "How is Miss Greene taking this? Jonas tells me she pulled a gun on her brother."

"If it hadn't been for Miss Greene," Kirby told him, "we'd have lost our boat already. We owe her a great deal."

"She hasn't come down to eat," Shannon observed, rubbing his jaw thoughtfully.

"I'll go up," Kirby said.

"And why must you be pushed?" the clerk asked dryly. "She's probably crying her eyes out now."

Kirby knocked on the cabin door a few minutes later, and Judy let him in. She'd been crying, but she was not now. Her eyes were dry as she asked him to sit down.

"You haven't eaten," Kirby said. "Shall I send your meal up?"

"I was about to come down," Judy explained. "What are your plans, Captain?"

"We're in a tight spot," Kirby said. "The combine boat is drawn across the mouth of the Medicine Island cove. We're in over a bad sand bar, and the river is falling rapidly. I had hoped to make another hundred miles or more tonight."

Judy nodded. "You think Brandon intends to keep

you in here," she asked, "until the river falls and you'll have to abandon the River Queen?"

"I believe that's his plan," Kirby told her, "and it's a good one."

"He's very clever," Judy said slowly. "He was always one who knew what he wanted, and he usually knew how to get it."

"Of course, we'll all be able to get back to Steamboat Bend," Kirby said. "Yellowstone Sam thinks it would be suicide, though, for any of us to attempt to remain with the boat until the spring thaw. We're in the heart of Indian country."

"Then you'll lose your boat," Judy Greene murmured.

Kirby shrugged. "Fall of the cards. I'll have the cook rustle up your supper."

He went out, and as he walked down past other cabin doors, the guard outside Cherry Mallote's door said, "Miss Mallote wants to see you, Captain."

Kirby pulled up. He stepped to the door and he said, "Anything wrong, Miss Mallote?"

The singer threw the door open and glared at him. "I believe I should be told what's going on, Captain," she snapped.

Kirby told her briefly of the encounter with the gray packet, and their run up into Medicine Island cove.

"It appears," he finished calmly, "that we shall have to walk back to Steamboat Bend and spend the winter there."

"Then you're going to lose your boat after all," Cherry said viciously.

Kirby nodded. "If it gives you any pleasure," he stated, "that's the way it looks."

"You killed Sharp," the singer said tersely. "You deserve everything that happens to you."

"Granville had himself killed," Kirby observed. "He took his chance and he died for it."

Cherry Mallote stared at him grimly for a moment, hatred in her eyes. Kirby knew, then, that she'd loved the dying Granville, or perhaps she'd loved the things Granville had promised to give her after they had collected the vast fortune from the River Queen.

She said slowly, "And what will happen to me, Captain?"

"We'll take you downriver in the spring," Kirby told her. "You will stand trial for your part in the attempt to steal my boat."

"You'll never take me downriver," the singer told him bitterly. "You'll see."

"Anything we can do to make you comfortable," Kirby said calmly, "let me know, Miss Mallote."

"I'll make you uncomfortable before I leave this boat," Cherry promised. "You'll remember that, Captain."

Kirby bowed politely. He closed the door again and went back to the salon. He met Yellowstone Sam McGee lounging against the wall just outside the door, and he said, "What do you think, Sam?"

"Long walk back to Steamboat Bend," McGee observed, "an' the sooner we start, the quicker we get there."

Kirby looked around. "She's a nice boat," he said.

"Nicer to be alive," McGee said thoughtfully. "Won't be more than three days afore they git wind of us here, Captain. Ain't nothin' the Sioux like better than a river boat stuck in a small cove an' unable to move out."

"We'll have to think of something before then," Kirby said.

"What?" McGee asked bluntly.

Kirby shook his head. "Might come by morning," he said. "We'll have to sleep on it."

"Take a hell of a lot o' sleepin'," Sam McGee murmured, "to git us out o' this one, Captain."

Kirby Trent thought so, too, as he stepped into the salon.

Chapter Thirteen

In the morning the sun came up hot and strong, and there was the usual heat mist on the river. At nine o'clock Kirby went ashore with Jonas Flynn and Sam McGee to check the position of the gray packet.

They pushed through the thick brush on Medicine Island, Sam McGee leading the way.

"Camped here a week once," McGee observed, when Kirby asked him if he knew the island. "Damned Sioux after my hair that time, an' nearly got it."

The island was heavily wooded, and the shores were dense with brush. It was evidently a refuge for migrant ducks, and great swarms of them lifted into the air along the shore.

Sam McGee said dryly, "Ate duck that week till it came out the ears."

Pushing carefully through the bushes along the shore, they came to the south tip of the island, and they could see the gray packet riding in deep water just beyond the sand bar. The mouth of the cove was about a hundred and thirty feet wide at this point, and the gray packet had been tied up across the opening, one rope from the bow wrapped around a tree on the island, and the other from the stern lashed to the mainland.

Kirby had a better look at the boat now as they crouched among the bushes. It was about the same size as the River Queen, but built considerably closer to the water. There were fewer cabins, and the texas was much smaller.

There was another curious feature of the boat that he hadn't noticed the night before. The combine boat was

painted gray, but not entirely gray. There were huge streaks and blotches of green and brown slashed across the hull, the cabins, and even the pilothouse.

"What in hell do you suppose that's for?" Jonas Flynn muttered.

"Could be," Sam McGee told him, "same reason the Sioux paint their faces. Git people scared of 'em."

Kirby had the answer, and it was another sample of Brandon Greene's ingenuity. Kirby said quietly, "Tie that boat up along the shoreline, and even in the daytime you wouldn't see it if you passed downriver a quarter of a mile away. Those streaks of gray and brown blend with the shoreline. You can see why they called the packet a ghost boat. It appears in different places as if by magic and no one has seen it on the river. She could tie up in the daytime in any cove or inlet along the river, and then move at night, hugging the shore, ready to dart in whenever another boat approached."

Jonas Flynn nodded admiringly. "She would be hard to see," he admitted.

Sam McGee said, "He's moved his cannon. Got 'em all on the starboard side facin' the cove now."

Kirby counted three brass cannon facing the cove. They were good-sized guns, capable of doing terrific damage to the fairly light hulls of a river boat.

"He's got us in a spot," Flynn growled. "He knows damned well we can't run out o' here an' ram him 'cause we got that sand bar in front of us. All he has to do is just sit there, an' when we come up to the bar he opens up with them cannon. Just like shootin' a duck that can't fly."

Kirby didn't say anything. He could see men moving about on board the gray packet. He didn't think Greene would have too big a crew, but it would be a picked crew, one he could depend upon, men who could handle the cannon, also, when they had to.

"Seen enough?" Sam McGee asked.

Behind them they could hear the crackle of rifle fire, and for a moment Kirby felt cold fear creeping over him. He looked at Sam McGee.

"Sioux?" he asked.

Jonas Flynn answered the question. "Heard some o' the passengers say they were goin' ashore to shoot ducks. That'll bring the Sioux quick enough."

"Injuns know we're here anyway," McGee told him. "Ain't nothin' goes on around here they don't know. Takes 'em a little time, though, to do somethin' about it. Every Injun I ever knew talks three hours an' fights one, but he'll fight like hell that one hour."

They started back to the boat, and they met some of the duck hunters moving along the marshes on the river side of the island. One of them, a perspiring, red-faced, bald-headed man, called to Sam McGee, "It safe hunting along here, Sam?"

"Safe fer you," the trapper told him soberly. "You ain't got no hair to lose anyway, mister."

The duck hunters returned to the safety of the boat hastily.

As Kirby went aboard, Fred Johnson, the engineer, said to him, "Want us to keep up steam, Captain?"

"I want a full head of steam all the time," Kirby stated. "Tonight give me the best wood you have on board—all the hardwood."

Jonas Flynn looked at him in surprise. "We goin' someplace, Captain?" he asked.

"Might be," Kirby smiled. "Been thinking on the way back from our little walk."

"About what?" Flynn wanted to know.

"A sawyer," Kirby murmured, "is a pretty tough thing for a river packet to run on, isn't it, Jonas?"

"It is that," Flynn agreed. "A plague on 'em."

"Be nice," Kirby continued, "if this gray packet were to run into a sawyer and have her bottom torn out."

"Be nice," Flynn grinned, "but not probable, inasmuch as she ain't even movin'."

"Take a crew of men ashore," Kirby said. "See if you can find a few experienced lumbermen among the passengers. I want you to bring back a smooth log, ten or fifteen feet long and a foot thick."

Flynn stared at him. "We—we settin' a trap?" he asked.

"Something like that," Kirby said.

"But he ain't comin' in here," Flynn pointed out.

"We might be going out there," Kirby said. "Bring back that log as soon as possible—a green log with spring in it."

Ten minutes later the mate went ashore on the mainland with a crew of a dozen men, all of them carrying axes. Kirby watched them go, and then he studied the position of the River Queen in the river. She was facing upstream, away from the cove inlet, but there was sufficient room to swing around in the cove so that the bow would face the combine packet. The gray boat lay around a bend in the cove, and out in the river beyond the sandbar. They could not see it from where they were tied up.

Kirby said to a curious man nearby, "Send me the carpenter, John."

The carpenter came up a few minutes later to crouch down beside Kirby. He listened intently as Kirby spoke, gesturing with his hands, telling the man exactly what he wanted done. When he'd finished he said to the carpenter, "Can you do it, and how long will it take?"

"Might need steel braces to hold her in place," the carpenter told him. "Might have somethin' in the hold I can use. Figure we can rig her up in three or four hours."

"There'll be carpenters among the passengers," Kirby said. "You'll have plenty of help."

"Might need a blacksmith, too," the carpenter pointed out.

"There'll be a blacksmith." Kirby smiled, thankful for

the fact that miners came from all walks of life. In a passenger list of nearly two hundred and fifty miners he was positive he would find a number of carpenters and blacksmiths.

Tom Shannon located them for him a short while before Jonas Flynn came back with his log. He'd picked out a good hickory timber about ten inches thick and twelve feet long. The lumber crew had stripped it of branches, peeling off the bark at the tapered end. They'd hauled it through the woods with ropes, and then slid it into the water.

Jonas Flynn came aboard just as the carpenter and his assistants were rigging up a platform on the waterline at the bow of the River Queen. They'd brought up the steel braces that would have to be used, and two blacksmiths were working in the engine room under the direction of the carpenter, bending the braces, boring holes in the iron.

Flynn looked down at the log, which was floating in the water just below the bow. He looked at it for a long time, and then he said slowly, "It might work, Captain. It's worth a try."

"I want a blunt edge on that timber," Kirby told him, "plated with steel."

"Why not a sharp edge?" Flynn asked.

Kirby shook his head. "When we ram her," he said, "we want a big hole beneath the waterline. A blunt edge will give us a big hole. She has to go down fast. If he ever gets his cannon working on us, we'll go down quicker than he will."

Flynn nodded in agreement. "That timber fastened to our bow will project over the sand bar?" he asked.

"I'm sure it will," Kirby said. "We're driving onto the bar at high speed, so that the timber will ram into the gray packet below the waterline. Whatever happens to us, we can't sink because we'll be fast on the bar, whereas

Greene is out in deep water with a huge hole below the waterline. We can always work our way off the bar later."

"If he doesn't sink us before we come up to him," Flynn murmured. "How do you figure that, Captain?"

"We'll drift to the point sometime tonight," Kirby explained. "Fred will have a full head of steam, and he'll be ready to turn it on at top speed as we come around the bend. It's only a hundred and fifty yards to the sand bar from the point. They might get off a shot or two at us if they're particularly watching, but we might find them off guard. They won't be expecting us to make a run for it, knowing that we can't get over the bar without some trouble, and they won't know about the projectile on our bow."

"Wouldn't hurt none," Flynn pointed out, "if Sam McGee an' I took some o' the boys up along the island and on the mainland to see that Greene didn't send spies down here to see what we're doin'."

"Form your scouting parties," Kirby told him. "We can't let that happen."

Jonas Flynn left, and Judy Greene came up to watch the work. She said quietly, "I knew you'd come up with something, Captain. Do you think it'll work?"

"We're taking the long chance," Kirby said. "Of course, I'll only have a skeleton crew on board the River Queen when we go down. All the passengers will be put ashore. I wouldn't want to risk their lives."

Judy looked up at the pilothouse. She said slowly, "You'll be up there, and that'll be where they'll send their first cannon shot when they see you."

Kirby shrugged. "My boat," he stated. "I'm making a fight for it." He added, "If we do manage to sink the combine boat, your brother is a good swimmer. He won't have any trouble getting ashore."

"I—I'm not worrying about Brandon," Judy told him, and she was still looking up at the pilothouse.

The blacksmiths were coming up with the braces now, and Kirby had to go over the side with them. He was thinking of Judy's statement, though, as he worked with the crew on the platform beneath the bow of the River Queen.

The men worked stripped to the waist in the high heat. No breeze penetrated the cove, and this was Indian summer. Kirby watched the braces being set in place, bolted to the sides of the boat, extending out to the long beam that lay just beneath the surface of the water. The blunt end of the beam had been plated with iron so that it wouldn't splinter when it smashed into the side of the combine boat. That blunt end would leave a huge gaping hole about a foot below the waterline. Timbers would be torn loose at the impact, and it would be almost impossible to plug the hole except in shallow water.

At four o'clock in the afternoon the workmen came aboard again, and the temporary platform was dismantled. Kirby looked down at their handiwork. The long beam was in place, firmly bolted to the bow.

Most of the passengers had gone ashore during the day, and they came back to stare at the contraption, discussing it in avid terms. Jonas Flynn and Yellowstone Sam came back with the report that none of Brandon Greene's crew had come ashore. The gray packet was in the same place, and Greene was evidently marking time until the river fell.

Flynn studied the beam, also, nodding his head in approval. He said, "When do you figure on movin', Captain?"

"Sometime after midnight," Kirby told him. "We're taking fifteen or twenty men aboard, and they must all be volunteers. I want riflemen to shoot at the gun crew on the combine boat."

"I'll get 'em," Flynn said. "Be more than twenty will want to go, though, Kirby."

"Twenty will be enough," Kirby told him.

They had another council of war that night around the dining table, and Kirby explained his plan in detail to Fred Johnson, Shannon, Flynn, and the men Flynn had lined up for the run.

Judy Greene came up to Kirby when the conference was over, and she said quietly, "I don't suppose there's any use asking you to take me aboard when this run is made."

Kirby shook his head. "I'm disembarking all passengers," he said. "You and Miss Mallote will have to wait ashore with the others."

"I can shoot a gun," Judy told him, "as well as most men."

"If you were aboard," Kirby said, "the men would have to consider your safety, and thus endanger their own lives. It wouldn't be right."

Judy nodded. "You're right," she said simply. "I'll go ashore."

At eleven o'clock that night Kirby went back to the engine room for a talk with Fred Johnson. He said to the engineer, "How much steam do you have up, Fred?"

"Hundred and ninety," Johnson told him. "Damned high. Too high."

"Put a flatiron on the safety valve," Kirby said, "when we start to drift down the cove."

The engineer stared at him and moistened his lips. "We've never done that before," he said.

"We've never been in a spot like this before," Kirby reminded him. "You'll be using the hardwood from now on to generate the extra heat."

"Aye, sir," Johnson nodded, "and you won't be using any bells?"

"No bells," Kirby said. "I'll use the speaking tube. When we come around the point in the cove and in sight of the combine boat, I'll want full speed, every-

thing you've got until we strike. If you don't hear from me, drive ahead anyway."

The engineer nodded again. "Careful up there, Captain," he said worriedly. "They'll aim that first cannon at you. If it hits, there won't be a pilothouse any more."

"You'll know what to do in any event," Kirby said. "We're fighting for a free river, Fred."

"I know," Johnson murmured.

At midnight they started to disembark the passengers. Kirby stood on the bank with Jonas Flynn cautioning the passengers to remain absolutely quiet. He saw Judy Greene coming down with the stragglers, and she hesitated at his side for a moment. He could see her face in the starlight, and then he reached out and took her hand, squeezing it before he dropped it. She returned the pressure, and he was thinking about that when he went aboard.

The River Queen had already been turned about in the river with the aid of ropes snubbed around the trunks of trees on the bank. Her bow now pointed toward the mouth of the cove.

The night had turned cool. There was no moon, but the sky was full of stars, and it was a silvery light that illuminated the River Queen, motionless against the bank.

"Crew aboard?" Kirby asked Jonas Flynn.

"All aboard, sir," Flynn said. "Yellowstone Sam has charge of the sharpshooters up on the texas. He'll tell them what to do."

"Anything else?" Kirby asked.

"Miss Mallote coming down now," Flynn said. "We can cast off when she's ashore. You think there's enough current in the cove to float us out to the point?"

"There's a current," Kirby told him. "When the ropes are cast off, we'll move."

He watched Cherry Mallote coming down the steps

from the texas. As she passed him standing by the plank he caught a glimpse of her oval face in the starlight. It was a bitter face, but also a triumphant face, and he didn't understand that. He thought possibly the starlight had been playing tricks with his imagination.

The planks were drawn up and the lines holding the River Queen to the bank cast loose. Kirby went up to the pilothouse, passing the group of riflemen on the texas. They watched him go up, none of them saying anything, all of them knowing that he would be the chief target for the cannon.

All lights had been put out on the boat. The fire doors were closed and blankets tacked across them. It was a white ghost that drifted slowly away from the shore.

In the pilothouse Kirby gripped the tiller wheel, turning the packet out into the cove. The drift was scarcely perceptible. He could see the crowd of passengers on the shore, silent, their faces white in the starlight as they watched, and then the passengers were gone.

Kirby spoke through the speaking tube. He said, "All ready, Fred?"

"You've got more steam up in this boat," Johnson told him, "than you've ever had before. We'd better start using it mighty soon, Captain."

"We will," Kirby assured him. "Stay by your levers, Fred."

"Sitting on them," Johnson told him laconically.

Kirby put the tube down. The point was another hundred yards or so down the cove, and the drift was stronger now as they came out into the center of the cove. It was not the downriver current they had had out in the center of the river, but it was a current, water sliding over rocks at the north end of the island, pushing down this cove, passing over the sand bar at its mouth.

The pilothouse was in total darknes. Down below on the texas Sam McGee had split his men into three groups,

each of them to work on different cannon crews. Jonas Flynn was with them. Kirby saw him once run down to the main deck to look over the bow, even though he couldn't see anything down there.

They were a hundred yards from the point, and then seventy-five. After a while it was fifty, and then twenty-five. Kirby picked up the speaking tube, holding it with one hand and the tiller with the other. He felt the sweat breaking out on his face. If Brandon Greene were alert on board the combine boat, those cannon would be ready to fire the moment the River Queen came into view. The pilothouse was sheathed with boiler iron for protection against Indian arrows and bullets, but not for cannonballs. Already Kirby could feel them ripping through, twisting the iron, shattering the thin boards.

They were fifteen yards from the point. He opened his mouth to speak, to give Johnson the order to put the boat in motion, and then he was conscious of the fact that something was wrong.

Flynn had run suddenly past the pilothouse toward the aft cabins. He was coming back now, racing up the pilothouse ladder. When he burst into the room he was panting.

"Fire in the rear cabins, Captain! That damned hellcat must have started a fire under her bed just before she came out. The River Queen's burnin', sir!"

Kirby felt sick. He remembered that look of triumph on Cherry Mallote's face when she left the boat. She'd got her revenge for the death of Sharp Granville.

"Take every man aft to fight the fire," Kirby ordered. "You've got to put it out, Jonas."

"We've only got these riflemen below," Flynn pointed out. "You'll have no protection—"

"Every man," Kirby snapped. "Quickly."

Flynn tore out of the cabin, calling his orders as he went down the steps. The groups of men on the texas

dropped their guns and raced after him as he headed for the aft cabins.

Kirby said into the speaking tube, his voice quiet, "Now, Fred."

Immediately, he felt the River Queen shiver and shake as the heavy engines connected. Steam hissed up through the gauges. White wood smoke gushed up from the twin stacks, and the huge paddle wheel started to revolve.

His hands steady on the tiller wheel, Kirby saw the long shape of the combine boat come into sight as the River Queen moved around the bend.

Yellowstone Sam came into the pilothouse and leaned out the window to spit. He said casually, "Figured one less fire fighter wouldn't hurt none, Captain, an' I might be able to pick off some o' them boys at the cannon."

"This is a bad place to be, Sam," Kirby told him. "You know that."

"Been in bad places afore." Yellowstone Sam McGee chuckled. "Now git me up close here, Captain, so's I kin pot a few o' them chaps."

"You'll be there soon enough," Kirby murmured.

They were moving at top speed now, the big wheel digging hard into the muddy water. The deck beneath them shook from the effort, but they were moving faster than Kirby had ever seen this boat move before. He kept her steady on the target.

"Shot many an arrow when I was a boy," Yellowstone Sam observed. "First time I ever *was* one. Think we'll stick her, Captain?"

Kirby didn't answer. He could see men running on board the combine boat. There was a red glow on the water to the rear of the River Queen as the fire in the cabins broke out through the cabin roofs.

Sam McGee lifted his Sharps rifle above the window sill. He said, "Here goes the first one, Captain."

His rifle cracked, and a man at the center gun slumped

forward. This center cannon was the only one that seemed to be manned. Someone was shouting hoarse orders as they bore down toward the boat, and then that center cannon winked orange.

There was a terrible roar, a terrific concussion that threw Kirby away from the wheel, pitching him back against the rear wall. The whole boat seemed to shake and crumple.

Dazed, his face bleeding, Kirby staggered to his feet and lurched back to the wheel. The River Queen had started to veer in toward the island bank, but he turned it back on the course again, and he stood there, feeling the blood dripping from his chin, keeping a tight grasp on the wheel.

The pilothouse seemed different, not as dark as it had been before. Every bit of glass had been shattered, and it was this flying glass that had cut Kirby.

Yellowstone Sam McGee got to his feet, pointed his gun at the crew around the center cannon, and fired again. Another man sagged over the barrel. The trapper spat, looked up, and said laconically, "Hell, we don't need that roof anyway, Captain. It ain't gonna rain tonight."

That first shot had torn the pilothouse roof clean off, letting in the starlight.

They were twenty-five yards from the bar, moving at top speed. Another cannon winked from the bow of the combine boat, the shot ripping the guard from the texas deck, passing upward to drive past their heads. They could feel the force of the ball as it went by. The displaced air nearly knocked them from their feet.

Kirby yelled, "Hold on, Sam!"

A moment later the beam smashed into the side of the combine boat. Kirby heard the grating, tearing sound. The gray packet shook from the impact. The men around the cannon were tumbled every which way.

Then the River Queen went on the bar. Kirby had released his grip on the wheel to clutch the side of the pilothouse, and Sam McGee did the same thing.

They went high up on the bar, tearing into the soft sand, pushing the gray packet out into deeper water. The pilothouse, already weakened by the hit from the cannonball, nearly went over when the River Queen went aground. Kirby felt himself driven against the wall, the breath literally forced from his body. He was conscious of the fact that both stacks on the River Queen had collapsed, falling across the texas deck with a terrific roar and a shower of sparks.

The pilothouse door had jammed and it was impossible to get it open. Kirby clambered out through the high window, brushing aside the broken glass with his hands. Sam McGee, too shaken to speak, followed him. They stumbled through the debris.

They had a glimpse of the combine boat drifting off the bar, the lines that had held her to the shore torn loose. Kirby could hear men yelling on board. Then he ran down the steps toward the burning cabins.

Jonas Flynn's men had been knocked off their feet, too, by the impact of the landing, but they were up again, battling the flames with wet blankets, and they were winning.

Flynn yelled hoarsely, "You hit her, Captain?"

"We hit her," Kirby said. A haze started to come across his eyes, and he fought to drive it away. Slumping to his knees on the deck, he said to Flynn, "Sparks down on the texas from those falling smokestacks."

"We'll take care of it," Flynn told him. "Stay where you are."

Kirby managed to get up as Flynn raced off with two of the crew. The fire fighters were being aided now by Fred Johnson and his crew, who had dashed up from the engine room after the River Queen ran aground. The fire

had not spread very far from Cherry Mallote's room. They had a hose on it now and the flames were gradually spluttering out.

Staggering past the fallen smokestacks, Kirby went up to the battered guardrail on the texas. Flynn had already quenched the few small fires that had started when the smokestacks crashed. He joined Kirby at the rail and they stood there watching the stricken gray packet. Already she was low in the water, and still drifting out into the open river.

Jonas Flynn said worriedly, "They'd better get off her before that water reaches her boilers. She'll blow, Captain."

Kirby saw one man leap off the bow. Another man was running toward the guardrail, and then the night exploded. The gray packet seemed to lift itself up out of the river like a stricken animal. The pilothouse and the texas disintegrated completely.

At a distance of a hundred yards Kirby could feel the heat of the big blast. Showers of burning embers fell into the river, some of them reaching the deck of the River Queen, and again the crew had to scurry around to put out the fires.

A huge chunk fell into the river a half-dozen feet off the starboard side of the River Queen, hissing as it went into the water. Then the burning hulk lay on the water, almost flat now, sheathed in flames.

It was ten seconds before Kirby Trent found his voice. He said to the mate, his voice husky with emotion, "Lower your boat, Mr. Flynn. See if you can pick up any survivors."

"Won't be any," Flynn muttered. "I don't think we'll find a one, Captain."

He went away, and Kirby stood there, staring at the wreck of the fastest boat on the Big Muddy, staring at the wreck of Brandon Greene's hopes and aspirations. He sat

down then because he was weak and sick, and because the fight was over. It was a free river.

At one o'clock in the morning they had fires going on the banks of the island, and passengers were wading out across the sand bar to climb aboard the River Queen.

Judy Greene bathed the cuts on Kirby's face as he lay on his bunk in the cabin. He was saying, "I didn't see him. I never saw him from the moment we came around the bend. There were no survivors, according to Flynn. It was hardly possible."

"It's better this way," Judy murmured. "I hope he never knew what happened to him."

Jonas Flynn came in to make his report. "Take a little work, Captain," he said, "but I figure we can get the River Queen over this sand bar by noon tomorrow. Crew's workin' on the stacks now. We'll get them rigged up, too, and we'll be off."

"Good work, Jonas," Kirby said.

The mate grinned at him and went out. Kirby lay there, looking up at the cabin roof above him. He said, "Now your father's gone and your brother's gone. What will you do, Judy?"

"I'll think about it when we reach St. Louis," Judy told him. "It's not important."

"It's important to me," Kirby murmured, "but we won't speak about it at this time. I'll have a question to ask you when we reach the lower river, Judy."

The girl looked down at him, but she didn't say anything.

Kirby Trent said, "You know what that question will be?"

She nodded. She knew, and from the look in her eyes Kirby knew what her answer would be, too.

He said softly, "Two women aboard this boat. One brought me all bad luck, and the other good. I believe

you'll have permanent booking on the River Queen, Judy, but not as a passenger."

"I would gladly ship with the crew," Judy Greene murmured as Kirby took her hand.

"You'll have the star cabin," Kirby smiled, "as long as the Big Muddy runs into the Mississippi, and I think that will be a long time. Till the stars fall from the sky."

"Till the stars fall from the sky," Judy repeated. "It's a pledge."

Kirby Trent felt the pressure of her hand in his. He was happy.

THE END

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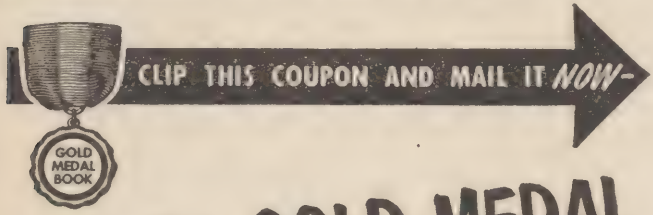

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